

IN SWADDLING CLOTHES

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton
December 24, 2007, Christmas Eve
Scripture: Isaiah 62:6-7; Luke 2:1-20

Anyone been out Christmas shopping lately? It's been a bit of a lackluster season at the stores I understand. Except of course for the foreign tourists in town whose dollars are worth more than ours. And the high end buyers, the ones who shop on Fifth Avenue a little higher in the fifties, who are looking for some bauble at Henri Bendel or Tiffany's to really catch the eye on Christmas morning.

It used to be designer watches were the symbol of wealth and wow, the kind of thing you'd slip in the bottom of the stocking for a real surprise. And if you think I am talking about Rolex or Cartier or Breguet, I'm not. The top of the line now among the truly rich is a brand most of us have never heard of. It's arguably the most exquisite timepiece on earth made by Franck Muller, whose Aeternitas series commands a stunning \$600,000 each. That's a lot of bling to tell time!

Many of the well off, unwilling to spend that much money on a watch, for heaven's sake, are turning to other, somewhat more accessible yet equally outrageously priced symbols of status; handbags.

Those who have survived the dotcom collapse and the sub-prime crisis are opting this year for handbags. In the *New York Times* this season there was an article in the style section describing a bag sold by Neiman Marcus called the 25 Chanel costing \$25,000 – and they sold them all “in a snap.”

If that seems pricey to you, you can always rent a bag. The Hermès Crocodile Birkin bag, for instance is available for just \$6010 a month!

These gifts may make yours and my splurges on iPods and Cross pen and pencil sets pale by comparison but people sometimes have more money than good sense. And if you have reached a certain station in life, you may want the world to know. After all, as Deion Sanders, the Atlanta Falcon cornerback put it so aptly, “They don't pay nobody to be humble.”¹

The irony of all this is that Christmas Eve at its heart, after all the stores are closed, and the streets have slowed, and night has come to this city that never sleeps, the mood shifts at long last, and we change our focus from the frenzy of these recent weeks going and doing and shopping and buying and wrapping and cooking and traveling, to hear once again the simplest of stories set in a town far away and a time long ago, where in the midst of a silent night, a holy night, a child is born.

And unlike the rest of the world that has gone a little mad for *things*, you, of all people, have found your way to the church at this late hour, to huddle into the pew with friends and strangers to hear in the midst of a place where Christmas is kept, the story of the birth of a lowly child in whom the hopes and fears of all the years are met tonight.

He is a miraculous child in many ways. The stories about him say so much. From the unusual circumstances of his origins, to the hopeful claims that are made about him sung by angels to weary shepherds he is an exceptional child. Why even peculiar

star movements will guide three wise men across the fields and plains, using their sextants to do calculations as they go, referring to the prophecies that foretell of his birth, so that they may come and worship him, Matthew's way of telling us that even kings will be subject to this carpenter sovereign.

It is a nighttime story, that quiets our frantic spirits and focuses our distracted thoughts on the peaceful town of Bethlehem where long ago, in an inn at the end of the world, a mother labored to give birth to a child we have all longed to see.

It must have been a wearying journey. Long and difficult on the back of a donkey, with Joseph walking beside. Not the kind of pre-delivery exercise that an obstetrician might recommend. I have heard of women who have run the marathon pregnant in the hopes of inducing labor. They are the kind of stalwart sort that run by the hospital, deliver the child, and then re-join the race, I suppose. But practically speaking, I would wonder if in full term it was wise for Joseph and Mary to have made this trip, so much was at stake for them, for all of us.

But under Roman rule, one does not have many choices. Augustus had ordered an enrollment, all the better to tax them with, as Luke tells us, and so those of the house and lineage of David returned to Bethlehem to fulfill the Emperor's command.

And during the night on a hillside beyond the town of Bethlehem, hills that I have seen, shepherds slept and took turns watching their sheep. There must have been a clearing of the clouds at midnight, some breaking open to the moon and the hills about them when that first angel appeared in the silvery shadows.

"Do not be afraid," he said, an auspicious way to begin. "I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people, for unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you, you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

And as if that were not enough, a heavenly chorus rang out, in whatever way we can speak of angel choruses singing. And the news was good, cigars for all. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace." A promise so good, so telling, that the shepherds forgot the sheep and ran to the city and found the inn and there, came to see the sign that they had been told to seek, a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger.

We know the story so well. We tend to romanticize it, smear Vaseline all over the lens, soften it with mood lighting. It lends itself to that, and there are so many editorial fingerprints on the story that it's hard to keep it clean, to take it back to the basic truth that it declares and the simple hope that it conveys.

But if that can be found anywhere in the story, it may be most evident in the sign that the angel gives to the shepherds, the deciphering code that will unlock everything for them, "you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." It sounds, I suppose, like a clue in the DaVinci Code, something mysterious and hidden. "You will find it if you go there. Shine blue light on it. Spray it with Luminol. Read it in a mirror. Look for the secret door handle, turn it left, then turn it right. Enter, and you will find a child wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger. You will know him when you see him."

The manger clue narrows things considerably. From that alone they knew that the child that they would find would be laid in an animal's feeding trough. Usually stone, hewn out and filled with grain so that the animals could reach the food easily without bending low. It was not difficult to assume, then, that the child would most likely be hidden in some cave-like structure where animals were kept, maybe a barn, or a lean to, or a stable. Where else might you find a manger?

But the other clue was a bit enigmatic. The child would be wrapped in swaddling clothes. We barely notice it because of the familiarity of the story. Its Elizabethan shading makes it sound extraordinary. Swaddling clothes. A sign.

But almost no New Testament scholar bothers to comment on the wrapping in which Jesus was bound. One scholar, Alan Culpepper, gives it only two sentences in the New Interpreter's Bible, "Wrapping a child in bands of cloth was a common practice." he notes. "It demonstrated maternal care and may have kept the child's limbs straight."²

Hmm. Not much there. But of course that's the point. The detail about the sign for the shepherds to follow is a colossal letdown. If the shepherds had been told that the child would be wrapped in ermine and purple, bearing a tiny crown, and holding a golden scepter, we would have understood. After all this is the king of kings and Lord of Lords, and he shall reign forever and ever. Hallelujah. We all know Handel's setting of it.

But no, the sign to the shepherds was **ordinary**, not *extraordinary*. It's as if the angel was saying, "You will find a child wrapped in diapers and tightly confined by a blanket from Buy Buy Baby, and he will be pretty much like every newborn kid in town." Though maybe the fact that he is newborn in a small town like Bethlehem might be a helpful sign. After all, how many newborn boys were born in the little town of Bethlehem that particular night?

His parents could not afford a room, they had no reservations, they didn't call ahead. The whole thing is rather poorly put together, if you don't mind my saying so, because it is so understated, so utterly common. Which is exactly Luke's point.

He is born as we are born subject to the circumstances of earthly complication. A child of flesh and blood, poor, and in a manger. His family are the *anawim* in Hebrew, the needy and undistinguished. They come from the backwater town of Nazareth in the hill country of Galilee, from whence nothing much good comes. He is so unremarkable and so disguised as a common child that it is more than fair to say that he is incognito.

The Nicene Creed of the church stands in stark contrast to the simplicity of Luke's account describing Jesus as "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God... who for us and for our salvation, came down to earth."

The outrageous, seemingly impossible possibility that Christmas is, is that something of God's own presence and being has come to dwell among us and one sign of it is that he is wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. He has come to know our lot, to experience all that being human is – the terrible, hair raising, wonderful passionate, sweaty, painful, glorious, awe-full experience of life.

Madeline L'Engle, who died earlier this year put it so well when she wrote,

[The problem with Christmas] lies not in secular bacchanalias, not in Santa Clauses with cotton beards... not in shops full of people pushing and shouting and swearing at each other as they struggle to buy overpriced Christmas presents.

No, it's not the secular world which presents me with problems about Christmas, it's God.

Cribb'd, cabined, and confined within the contours of a human infant. The infinite defined by the finite? The Creator of all life thirsty and abandoned? Why would [God] do such a thing?³

And the only answer is, for love. For love of us, for love of the world, for love of all that is, God has done this. Taken human flesh and dwelt among us, Emmanuel, God with us.

And how desperately this old world needs that mantle of grace to fall across its shoulders and warm it with its drape, in this darkest time of the year and coldest season of all. We need some good news about now, some signs of hope in the midst of our winter darkness.

We struggle on in a war that seems endless, nearly 4000 deaths of American soldiers now, 29,000 American casualties with exponentially more Iraqi and Afghani deaths. It is a hard Christmas for those who are there on extensions of active duty. Tonight they will swaddle themselves on a cot in a barracks in the Green Zone and tomorrow drive in a Humvee through the most dangerous parts of Baghdad looking for IED's implanted in the roads and for parked cars loaded with explosives left streetside by green markets where women with children will shop.

Tonight there are two women I know, one close, one far away, one in the hospital and one at home who will swaddle in blankets to keep away the shivers. Both of them fighting the good fight against a cancer that has taken its toll; no hair, no appetite, no moment without pain, but they are fighting nonetheless. When midnight comes they will rest easy, God willing, warm in their blankets.

I think about a friend who has been fighting addiction, punctuated with alcohol and crystal meth. Life is pretty dark when you live in that grip. She will rest fitfully on the couch in the living room through the night, swaddled in an afghan that her mother knit many years ago, with the Christmas tree in the corner offering its glow to the room, but not much else to cheer her spirits.

A young couple will lie close to each other this Christmas Eve. They have been going through a bad patch in their life together. Swaddled in their comforter in their too large bed, they will reach out to one another and nestle close at times, attempting to express with their bodies what presence of affection that yet remains and that still longs, however haltingly, to be offered.

Christmas is supposed to be a happy time, a joyful season, and all is supposed to go well. Sugar plums and candy canes, dancing fairies and teddy bears. But the truth of the matter is that it is not an easy time. It's full of memories, some wonderful, some bittersweet, some hard to take. We all of us get a little misty at it because the difference

between the world that we experience, and the world of sugar plums and make believe is so discordant.

We miss the people who used to be at the table but are no more. And no group of people on earth have a longer memory of fault and slight, real and imagined than do families, which is why they can be so hard to be with. We all descend on mom's house at Christmas time, and in come all the happy memories of Christmas past, and all the hurts as well.

I am told that the most numerous 9-1-1 domestic violence responses of the entire year occur on Christmas day. And depression is often hardest to manage for those who struggle with it, in the weeks leading up to and following Christmas.

Into this world, he came. A child born to poor and lowly parents, displaced by Herod's decree. He lived his life as an itinerant preacher, and where he went lives were touched with healing, souls found peace. In him the blind were given sight, the lame danced, the poor had good news brought to them, and the dead were raised to new life.

He came with one purpose, to out-live and out-love us all, so that we might know that God has been with us, and is with us always, Emmanuel.

A comic strip one Christmas Eve some years ago showed a crowd in a village looking wonderingly at a brilliant star in the sky. A small boy asks his mother, "Is that bright star where heaven is, Mom?" "Maybe," she answers, "Or maybe this is."

And that's it. The line between heaven and earth has been blurred this night. For God has come down to earth and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. And this will be a sign unto you. You will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, like all of us once were, and there he will be, lying in a manger.

Good news! Unto *you* is born this day in the city of David a savior which is Christ the Lord!

Merry Christmas!

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¹ I am grateful to Martin Marty for all this information on expensive handbags, and this quote from Deion Sanders, who describes all this in his M.E.M.O. column, *The Christian Century*, December 11, 2007 issue, (Chicago: The Christian Century, 2007) 55.

² Alan Culpepper, **The New Interpreter's Bible : A Commentary in Twelve Volumes**. The Gospel of Luke, Vol. 9. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 63

³ Madeline L'Engle and Luci Shaw, **Wintersong**,