

Swaddling Attire

Text: Luke 2: 1-7; Colossians 3: 12-17

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Some words have curious staying power. Take, for example, the way that the Gospel of Luke describes Mary as she dons Jesus in his first earthly outfit. “She wrapped him in swaddling clothes . . .”

My wondering hovers with that adjective swaddling. So I turn to my ever-present friend Goggle who in less than a few seconds tells me a whole lot more than I thought there was to know about such things!

“Swaddling is an age-old practice of wrapping infants in blankets or similar bands of cloth so that movement of the limbs is tightly restricted.” It was considered the best practice of the day because “restricting a child’s movement was believed to help the child to sleep.” “It was also understood as the proper way to protect and strengthen the back and bones of the child for good growth.” It wasn’t until the 17th century that swaddling an infant fell out of favor – and was actually called into question for being excessively constraining. Closer to our time, more recent years have brought the practice back as it comes full circle!

I’d say that takes a good bit of the enchantment and romance out of the imagined moment and the manger-side dressing of Jesus! Still, that particular modifier “swaddling” holds an honored place in my lexicon of sacred words.

But such swaddling attire is only where we being today. Just as it should be babies grow up and rather quickly at that. It’s part of the human design. Jesus was no exception. He grew up and out of the manger. And though we know very little of his childhood, but one brief moment, we know lots about his destiny.

True for his parents Mary and Joseph and for Jesus the swaddling cloths were left behind. Luke continues his story: “The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.” And later again, “Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.”

This is the way of life. Being human calls for an ever-emerging maturity of body and mind, heart and soul. It assumes an intentional commitment of growing up. And not just for Jesus, but for those of us who seek to follow.

You surely remember Mike Piazza who spent a weekend with us last January helping us to become a vital congregation in new ways. He has created some rather memorable sayings about Christian life. Among them is that to be a Christian is to grow up and take off the bib of dependency and put on the apron of service. That’s pretty vivid! Another colleague of mine likes to say that the booties of early believing must necessarily be traded in for the sandals of service.

So take those thoughts and fast-forward with me as scripture amps it up. “Put on the garments of Christ,” Paul admonishes. (Nothing sentimental or soft about that!) That is, take on, become in yourself, live and believe as Jesus has set before us the way and identity of Christian life.

In our reading for today Paul gets pretty explicit about what it might look like if we could leave the manger more readily and follow the growing and maturing Jesus out into the world. “Clothe yourselves . . . with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience.” Or in another translation, “Dress in a new wardrobe,” he says, and then adds . . . “discipline, quiet strength, forgiveness, even-temperedness” . . . to the Christian closet.

Sometimes allowing such attributes to grow in us is very difficult, and other times not at all. On Christmas Eve an 83-year-old woman named Elizabeth died. She had come to be known as the “hug lady.” For the last dozen years of her life she took on the mission of making sure that any and every soldier being deployed from or returning to Fort Hood in Texas received the warmth of personal touch and embrace. “She was there for them, with open arms. More than half a million of them -- soldiers from Fort Hood anxiously heading off to war. And some -- with the deepest relief imaginable -- coming home.”ⁱⁱ

“Clothe yourselves with love which binds everything together . . . forgive one another . . . bear one another . . . support one another . . . let Christ dwell in you richly. And above all,” Paul concludes, “be thankful.”

So this side of Christmas let’s get to it! Lord knows there are good and plentiful places and ways to put our resources, our hands and our hearts to. There is a world filled with need, and lots of them nearby. The preparing for Christmas, the candles and Silent Night, even all of the gifts and giving were only prelude to what waits.

As Howard Thurman wrapped in words that we shall sing in just a few moments: “when the song of the angels is stilled/when the star in the sky is gone/when the magi and the shepherds have found their way home/the work of Christmas is begun.”ⁱⁱⁱ

But here’s the essential shift: swaddling clothes are not needed anymore! In fact, they will slow us down, distract our focus, and render us ineffective maybe even irrelevant. More appropriate attire is needed for the work of the Gospel.

So let’s get to our closet! And let’s get to work! Amen.

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ⁱ Wikipedia and related on-line sources. Believe it or not, one could spend a whole afternoon just chasing down the word “swaddle!”

ⁱⁱ Jim Axelrod. “Remembering Fort Hood’s Hug Lady,” CBS News. December 26, 2015. (CBS.com)

ⁱⁱⁱ Howard Thurman. The Mood of Christmas. Friends United Press, 1973, p. 23.