

Luke 2:1-6

Twenty four years ago, I preached a sermon on Christmas Eve and it was the last time that I would read the familiar Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke and see it in the same old way. You see, my life changed irrevocably two weeks after that Christmas Eve when my first child was born two weeks early. I became a father.

I couldn't even begin to describe all of the ways that things changed for me but one of the big ones is that I learned so much. One of the very first lessons I learned was how to swaddle my child. I'm pretty sure that the nurses in the hospital taught me how to do that first. I guess it is one of those few things in those first days, that a father can do. So, I like to think that I became quite good at it – an expert in infant origami if you like.

The reason why new parents in North America are encouraged to swaddle their newborns is apparently because it is very comforting. After all, your child has just spent months confined in a very small space and she has now emerged into this strange place where nothing restrains her when she spreads out her arms and her legs. It is alien and strange. It is symbolic of this poor helpless being now thrust into this cold dark world full of dangers and evils. And so, if you can simulate the warmth and the confinement of the womb, at least some of the time, it can be a great comfort and so you learn to wrap her up tight in a blanket.

It is a bit of parental wisdom that has been passed down since times of great antiquity. How old is it? It is so old that it was already well known when Mary had her child. New Testament Greek did not have a word for swaddling like English does. What the text literally says is that when Mary's child was born, she wrapped him in strips of cloth. But the meaning of that is clear enough. So, the old King James Version was quite correct when it translated that as, **“she wrapped him in swaddling clothes.”**

But, since she did not have a nice, perfectly sized baby blanket that she had ordered from amazon.ca while preparing for the arrival, Mary had to resort to using several strips of cloth instead. Instead of one, let's say that she used three.

But I was thinking. Mary's child was no ordinary infant, was he? He was, we are told the Son of God. And how, exactly, do you comfort the Master of the universe who suddenly finds himself thrown into this dark and often disturbing world? With what, then, did Mary swaddle her extraordinary child?

I believe that one of the strips of cloth she used was the devoted love of a mother. Her own body had protected him throughout his gestation,

even through some very difficult episodes and probably the most harrowing journey that Mary had ever taken she when traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem. As she had shielded him with her own body, she would continue to do so with all her love. She wrapped him tight in her love.

The second strip of cloth that Mary took to swaddle her child, was the deep and rich tradition of her people. Jesus would know who he was by learning all the stories of the people of Israel. And the final piece of cloth was the law of those people. These time-tested rules for living would provide for the growing child the boundaries and the limits of his behaviour.

These three swaddling cloths are things that we all need. If we are fortunate, if we are blessed, we all received these things as children, and they helped to make us the people we are today. Because we knew that we were loved, because our traditions and practices told us who we were and because we had wise and reasonable rules to guide us, we were given that strong foundation that allowed us to go out into the world and make our way. These things are invaluable.

But there is one thought I would add to that. Swaddling is good and comforting for a newborn, but it is hardly healthy to keep a child confined that way. As they grow, they need to stretch out their limbs and start to define themselves. This too is an essential part of life.

And wow, did Jesus stretch out his limbs. He took that love that he had received from his mother and turned it into a love that was able to encompass the whole world. In the ultimate display of such love, he stretched his arms and his legs wide on the wood of a cross.

And Jesus took the noble teachings of his people, and he stretched them to extend to many others. He took that special relationship and covenant blessing that his people enjoyed and showed the whole world how they could experience that as well. He taught us all of a loving heavenly father who pours out blessing on all the people of the world.

And as for the law of his people, he never lost his reverence for that, but he taught that it was never meant to be cruel or vindictive like some people applied it. He certainly taught that it was never meant to exclude people who didn't fit in but rather designed to draw people in close. He also showed in word and deed how the grace and mercy of God can overcome even our worst transgressions against the law.

But it all started with a newborn babe, swaddled in strips of cloth and lying in a manger. It is such a fitting beginning of the hope of the world.