

God in swaddling cloths

Luke 2:1-14

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In the Roman world of 5 B.C., our story begins, proceeding through three scenes:

Scene 1: The protagonists were Caesar Augustus, on the one hand, the prime mover who took the initiative, set everything in motion, and commanded the census of the “whole world,” and Joseph and Mary, on the other hand, the “moved” who obeyed the imperial order. Yet God Himself was actually the Engineer behind it all. Without forcing anyone’s will, His Spirit was hovering over the ebb and flow of history, brooding over its ups and downs, urging toward the fulfillment of God’s good purposes for humanity, but letting humans make their own choices and mistakes, and He just kept picking up the pieces, mending the broken wherever possible, correcting the course – perfect conjugation of God’s sovereignty with human dignity and freedom. The **historical setting** would focus first on Nazareth and these two from the lineage of David (Joseph and Mary). This would be the fulfillment of prophecy to put a King from David’s house on the throne of Israel, and the house of David had its roots in Bethlehem, Hebrew for “house of bread” (this was the prophetic fulfillment of Micah 5). Actually the census also afforded them the opportunity to leave Nazareth, where all the tongues might begin to wag over Mary’s “premature pregnancy,” since these two had to go to Bethlehem because of their ancestral connection. Thus, this one to be born would make His appearance right there in the “house of bread”; in fact, He had come to offer Himself as the true **bread for our starving souls**. “House of David / House of Bread”: He would be the King of our souls and bread for our souls, all in one (you might say you could “have your king and eat Him too!”). And for this initial appearance He would be wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger (feed trough), because there was no room for them in the guest room (Greek: *katáluma*, Lk. 22:11); i.e., the house was overflowing with guests and relatives who had come to fulfill their civic duty regarding the tax rolls of Caesar, those oppressive Romans. It was a fallen world, and they all had to bear with it. *“Our fall was, has always been, and always will be, that we aren’t satisfied in God and what He gives. We hunger for something more, something other”* (Ann Voskamp). Some other bread, some other stimulus or entertainment, the sensational delights of this world...

Scene 2: The protagonists here are angels (the prime movers) and shepherds (the moved). The focus is on the angel’s message: first, don’t be afraid (because the text says they were terrified!). Then it moves on to the **Good News** itself, literally, *“I evangelize you with great joy for all the people”*; in effect, this IS the good news, the “mega-joy” that will be for all the people: namely, the long-awaited Savior has been born, and He’s none other than the Lord Messiah! So how will they find Him? His “sign” would be swaddling cloths and a manger. What irony! This baby was like any other baby in this regard, yet so different because of the portents surrounding His birth, the titles He bore, the promises concerning His life and its impact. Yet notice what a totally down-to-earth outfit He’s wearing – exactly what any other baby of His time would’ve worn. He was no less than God in swaddling cloths! It was the common way at that time of making a baby feel safe and secure, a kind of simulation of the restrictive quarters of the mother’s womb. God in swaddling cloths was making Himself **accessible** to

humanity, drawing near to us in weakness, in a way that we could understand: the Word become wordless, the Omnipotent made helpless, the Creator of galaxies dependent on the care of others, the Good Shepherd becoming a Lamb, the eternal Spirit made mortal flesh ... God in swaddling cloths was seeking to translate His divine love into earthly terms: showing Himself to be humble, meek, gentle, fully capable of being a child (even as He would later invite us to become childlike), as much as He would also be a man fully in control of the elements of nature (just as He would invite us to put ourselves under that same lordship), or as surely as He would become a victim suffering with forbearance and restraint the injustice and wrath of a rebel race (and would invite us to take up our cross and follow Him). All of this is latent in those lowly human swaddling cloths He first wore.

Scene 3: The Road to Bethlehem is the focus of this scene, though we will not read the text. We well remember from all the *Belenes* and nativity scenes we've witnessed that the shepherds do go and find the babe. But we're not reading that portion because it's our application. The shepherds received the message and they got up and left the fields. (Did they leave their flocks? My theory says they just herded them up and took them with them!) **The question here** is whether you and I, having also heard the great announcement, will be moved to do anything about it! Or whether we will simply go through the motions of another Christmas, exchanging gifts and enjoying wonderful meals, Christmas parties and other gatherings, etc., and then **continue on our life journey unchanged**, or will we respond to the announcement?

At Christmas for one brief moment, writes C.S. Lewis, we observe Him there in the manger: "**Once in our world, a stable had something in it that was bigger than our whole world**" (Spanish: "*Hubo una vez en el mundo un pesebre, y en el pesebre algo más grande que todo el mundo.*") We could follow Lewis's lead here and invent something similar about Good Friday, where for one brief moment we observe Him on a cross, dying by our hands: "**Once in our world, a cross had someone hanging on it whose power exceeded that of the one who held all of humanity captive, because His grace was greater than all our sin.**" And similarly at Easter, for a brief moment we observe the same One emerging from the tomb: "**Once in our world, a tomb could no longer contain the One whose power breaks even the bonds of death.**" How is it that our lives, for such a brief moment passing once through this world, do not bow to Him in constant worship and reverence and loyalty, seeing that He is the very Source of our being and our only hope for rescue?

So come on now, let's also go to Bethlehem, the house of bread, and see this thing that has come to pass that the Lord has made known to us *too*! The text says that those shepherds made haste – this was such wonderful good news that struck such a deep chord in them, but I don't know **if we're more excited** about the coming of the Savior, or just the coming of Christmas with all its trappings! ... So what about it? Will you also **make haste** this Christmas **to come and kneel** before the Savior? Will we even take time to do so at all? And acknowledge Him as our King, the true Bread? **This** is the **only real celebration of Christmas**: all our beautiful music and Scripture reading and carefully ordered liturgy and decorating and warm well-wishing – it's all **utterly meaningless ritual** if it does not lead to this: that we **truly bow to Jesus and confess Him** as Messiah, Lord, King, our true nourishment, the bread of life, our only rescue! Here is the longing of our hearts – may we not miss this fulfillment!