

## **Luke 2:1-20 Strips of Cloth and a Manger. Christmas Eve, 2005**

### **A Sermon by Pastor Brad Smith**

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I was able to be present at the birth of each of my three sons, and I remember those experiences clearly. As soon as Becky was safely in her room, I called our friends and relatives to share with them our happy news.

New parents are eager to spread the news. Sometimes the mother will tell about her experience of labor and delivery. The parents always tell everyone if they had a boy or if they had a girl. Usually they give the height and the weight of the baby. They will try to describe what the baby looks like, and whether it looks more like the father or more like the mother. They will always tell everybody the name of the baby, and sometimes they will say how they chose the name. Often they will send out birth announcements with the names of the parents, a photo of the baby, the name, the birth date and time, where the baby was born, and the height and weight. Those are the common pieces of information when we retell the story of a birth.

The passage from Luke that we just read is the birth announcement of Jesus. He includes some of the things we would expect in a birth announcement, such as the names of the parents and the place where the child was born. But he also includes a very unusual piece of information. And Luke feels that this special information is so important that he says it three times: Verse 7 says, “She wrapped him in strips of cloth and placed him in a manger.” Verse 12 says, “This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger.” Verse 16 says, “So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in a manger.”

Why was it so important for everyone to know that Jesus was wrapped in cloths and laid in a manger? The angels said it was a sign. A sign tells us what something is. It identifies a store or a street, for example. How did cloths and a manger identify Jesus? How did they tell us who he was? Two possible answers came to my mind.

The first one is obvious, but it is still amazing. When God chose to come to earth, he chose to come humbly. One of my sons loves the Walt Disney movie Aladdin. It is about a poor boy who receives three wishes. He uses one wish to become a prince, and he rides into the city on an elephant. He is dressed in great luxury, and he has servants walking in front of him to clear

the way. In reality he is poor, but he comes as a rich and powerful man. His sign was silk and jewels.

Jesus is God the Son, the King of kings, the all-powerful one. Yet he chose the sign of cloths and a manger, to be born into weakness and poverty. And Jesus lived according to his sign throughout his life. He lived in an unimpressive village, he chose humble apostles. He made his final entrance into Jerusalem riding a humble donkey, not a proud war horse.

So that is the first reason that cloths and a manger serve as the sign of Jesus. He was and is humble. He came down to our level. We can approach him because he became approachable.

The cloth and the manger serve as a sign of Jesus in another way as well. I would not have seen it myself, but when I read this second reason in a commentary I knew that the author was correct. Listen again to Luke 2:7. "She wrapped him in strips of cloth and placed him in a manger."

Now jump forward 33 years and listen to Luke 23:53. "Then he took [Jesus' body] down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb." The cloth and the manger are the sign of Jesus' birth because they are also the sign of his death. Recently I gave a funeral message, and in that message I said that, "God did not create us so that we could die; he created us so that we could live." And that is true. We were created to live. Death is something evil that was not part of God's good plan.

But death did come into the world through human rebellion against God. Jesus accepted the curse of death into himself and took it to the Cross. At the beginning and at the end of his life on earth, someone else took him, wrapped him, and laid him down. But that was not the whole story. At the proper time, Mary and Joseph took their baby out of the manger and brought him home. And at the proper time, God the Father took his Son Jesus out of the tomb and he returned in glory to heaven.

The Christmas story and the Easter story are not two stories, but one. Jesus, King of kings and Lord of lords, left the glory of heaven. He came humbly to earth, became like us, was wrapped in cloths, and was laid in a manger. The time came when he was again wrapped in cloths, and laid in a tomb. But he burst out of the tomb, returned to the glory of heaven, and now enables us through the Holy Spirit to become like Him. Merry Christmas.