

*Lost Verses of Famous Carols*  
***Swaddling Clothes About Him***  
*John 1:18; Titus 2: 11-14*

**First Presbyterian Church  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**December 13, AD 2020  
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In our child rearing days, swaddling an infant was not in fashion. The feeling was you don't want to restrict any natural movements. I'm glad swaddling infants at night has made a comeback. Wrapping the baby's arms close to his body with a soft blanket makes sleeping much easier. The natural startle-reaction tends to wake a baby. After all, the wide open air is very different from the cozy womb. They aren't use to finding nothing but air when they move their limbs. Being wrapped tight keeps the child from startling. So they sleep better, more contentedly. (And that makes for happier parents too!)



Swaddling has been used around the world for thousands of years. Sometimes, perhaps, with too much restriction. You don't want to keep the baby bound up day and night. But for a newborn, being wrapped in a blanket is a tender sign of love. In fact, there's a passage in Scripture that mentions *not* being swaddled as a sign of neglect or even abandonment. In Ezekiel, we read how the LORD chides his people Israel for their unfaithfulness. God's people act like they had no God who loves them and cares for them, as if they were unwanted children. So God describes them, "On the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you...nor wrapped in swaddling cloths (Ez. 16: 4). The LORD's people were behaving as if they were children "cast out on the open field," unloved and discarded. Not much has changed, has it? We still have a startle reaction. We panic over circumstances and act as if we do not have a God who loves and watches over us.

By contrast, Mary wrapped the infant Jesus in swaddling clothes. She snuggled him in close-fitting cloths to keep him warm and safe. This is a humble detail of the glorious Christmas story. It's also a key part of the sign that the angels gave to the shepherds. They told the startled men that a mighty savior had been born. They would know this child by a sign. Not a glorious sign. But a startlingly common one: the baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a feeding trough.

The lost verses from “O Come All Ye Faithful” that we will sing today ponders this mystery:

Father eternal, Thine eternal splendour  
Now veiled in flesh our eyes shall see:  
God as an infant, swaddling clothes about him.

Another translation says simply, “The infant God wrapped in cloths!” Each week during Advent we’ve been saying together from John 1:18, “No one has ever seen God, but God the one and only, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.” Other versions say, “The only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.”



It happened this way. The unseeable God showed up wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger. The old word is a “cratch.” That’s the feeding box where animals munched. The king had a cratch for a cradle. These were the surprising signs proving his arrival.

In the book of Job (38: 8-9), the LORD describes how he has created and then enclosed the great oceans within their bounds. God teaches Job about his total sovereignty by using the image of swaddling a child. The LORD says that he swaddles all the seas with bands of darkness, and then turns the waters to and fro like a child playing with a doll wrapped in a blanket. Our Creator God is so immense that he swaddles the oceans like we would a baby.

Think of this passage as we come to the manger, the cratch, today. Our immeasurable God allows himself to be constricted in cloth bands! The uncontainable God fits within a crude cratch. And bids us come see him in his humility. As the angels invite the shepherds, the church of Jesus Christ is born. We leave our ordinary lives and go to see the strange, glorious sight of the Creator’s humility. God as an infant, swaddling clothes about him.

Martin Luther reflected on how this moment in history still applies to us. Luther compared the pages of the Bible to the swaddling cloths on Jesus. When we seek Jesus in the Scriptures, it is as if we go to see the baby. Gently, reverently, we turn the Bible’s pages as we read, and so we unwrap the child so we can see who Jesus is. The Christ child is not in Bethlehem any more. But he, by his wonderful humility, has given himself to be found in the Gospels. Again and again we can go to him. The God who is beyond any human thought to comprehend lets

us find him. He lets us understand his heart. The God whom no language of men or angels can adequately describe, gives us words in the Scriptures that can bring us into communion. He reveals himself so our minds and hearts can relate to him. If we come, like the shepherds, in faith, asking to see, open to what he would reveal. Think of that when next you read the Bible. As you turn the page, you unwrap the swaddling cloths to see the baby for who he is!



Now the thinkers and the poets through the years have made another connection. Lancelot Andrewes said the cratch and the cross go together. The Christ-child was wrapped tight and placed in the cradle, and could not leave. He would grow to be the Christ-man pinioned to the cross from which he would not escape. Indeed, as Malcolm Guite observes, there's a connection between the swaddling cloths and the burial clothes in which the crucified Jesus was placed. He was wrapped tightly in that winding sheet. Placed securely in the tomb. From cratch to cross, from stable to cave.

That baby out-grew swaddling cloths. He didn't need those blankets as he matured. Jesus also outgrew the burial cloths. He didn't need those sheets as he resurrected into new creation. He left them behind, folded neatly in a corner of the tomb, never to be used again.

Let's turn this one more way. The Son of God wrapped himself in flesh when he came to give himself to us. His skin was the real swaddling clothes. The same clothes we are all dressed in. So soft in our infancy, so glowing in our prime, so saggy and marked in our decay. As the years go by, our skin bears the scars of all our living. These swaddling clothes of flesh prove to us year by year how frail and mortal we are. We are dressed in "rags of time." We are swaddled in mortality. How quickly we pass from the beauty of infant skin to the worm meat of the grave.

And yet. And yet. Our Savior has worn the rags of time all the way through being nailed and pierced and thrown away. He got dumped into death. But in the great Nativity of Easter, he discarded the rags of time for the clothing of everlasting life. In Christ, we too will step from the tent of these bodies into the home of our embodied yet eternal resurrection life.

This Christmas, go to the pages of Scripture and unwrap the swaddling cloths. Gaze on the mystery of "God as an infant." Follow him from cratch to cross, this God who would not be without us. And let us give the final word to our friend Malcolm Guite in these lovely and mysterious prayer:

Unfold for us the mystery of grace  
And make a womb of all this wounded world.  
O heart of heaven, beating in the earth,  
O tiny hope within our hopelessness,  
Come to be born, to bear us to our birth,  
To touch a dying world with new-made hands  
And make these rags of time our swaddling bands.<sup>1</sup>

Yes, Lord Jesus, you came from the heart of the Father to the crude cratch of our flesh. Now make these rags of time to be but swaddling bands of everlasting life in you.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the best parts of living, believing and worshipping in the deep main stream of Christian orthodoxy is having vast resources to pull into the present. We get to join spiritual hands in fellowship with the luminaries who have gone before us. It is a joy to acknowledge that the essence of this sermon belongs to Malcolm Guite who himself draws on ancient sources. My words are based on his beautiful essay "Swaddling Bands," in his new book *Heaven in Ordinary* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2020, pp. 13-15). He quotes Lancelot Andrewes, Luther, and John Donne's phrase "rags of time" before concluding with this sonnet that is itself part of his series of sonnets on O Come, O Come Immanuel.