

# “Wrapped in bands of cloth”

Luke 2:1-20

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Christmas Day

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Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

Those of you who read my blog post last week know that I preached my first Christmas morning sermon when I was 24 years old – and not because everyone in the church was anxious to hear what I had to say, but because I was the only available option.

The senior pastor had left for another church just a few weeks before, and I was the only one left who could do it.

Lots of people gave me advice about what to do with that sermon. When you're a young pastor, you have hundreds of people who like to give you friendly advice. (Actually, when you're an older pastor, you still have hundreds of people who like to give you friendly advice. But that's another story.)

Anyway, the best advice I received before that first Christmas sermon was from an elder at that church. He said, **“You know, Doug, at Christmas people just want to hear the beautiful music, and they want to sing the carols, especially the familiar ones, and then they would like to listen to the Christmas story. So, whatever you do, don't get in the way of that.”**

And I think he was right. This Iowa farmer – his name was Bob Faber – this Iowa farmer taught me an important lesson – namely, that a preacher should not get in the way of the Christmas story.

The Christmas story does not need my help. It's a wonderful and powerful story, maybe the most exciting story in the whole Bible, and the worst thing that could happen would be if a young theological student, which is what I was, started to explain the story.

But there is something I want to say today, something that I think is terribly important, something that helps me to understand what is happening in Luke's version of the Christmas story.

The psychologist Jonathan Haidt (“hide”) once published some very intriguing data on what he called **“elevation,”** which he describes as the opposite of **“disgust.”** We can all think of things that disgust us or cause us to feel revulsion.

When a truck plows through a crowd of people at a Christmas market in Germany, we feel disgust and horror and revulsion. When we see pictures of the devastation in Aleppo, we feel disgust and anger and outrage. When we see a co-worker act dishonestly – or when we see church member act hypocritically – we feel disgust about that. There is a physical response – a tightening in the chest, a clenching of the jaw, and maybe some indigestion in our stomachs.

But according to the research provided by Jonathan Haidt (“hide”) there is an opposite feeling which is every bit as powerful. And he did not mean his research to apply to the Christmas story, but I thought of the connection immediately.

Haidt says that when we are witnesses to what he calls an act of moral beauty, when we witness something so good, so generous, so self-sacrificing, that also has a profound effect on us. Those things, he says, elevate us. They move us to want to do something similar.

If you see someone help a stranger – or perform an act of kindness, let’s say – you might not think that that would affect us much, but studies show that there is physical response, a feeling of warmth, a sudden rush of tears, a lump in your throat.

And more importantly, seeing an act of moral beauty prompts within us a desire to do likewise, to be that kind of person ourselves.

But there’s more. This kind of elevation, according to the research, is contagious. If a story of great courage is told, if someone tells a story about something heroic, it can elevate an entire auditorium of people.

Christians have known this for a long time, which is why we encourage people to give their testimonies, to talk about how God has been active in their lives. When someone stands in front of us and says, **“I was lost, but now I am found,”** we find ourselves moved in ways we did not expect. Stories like these can change the whole course of our lives.

So, what does this have to do with the Christmas story? Well, think of the shepherds. What happened to them out in the fields as they were keeping watch over their flocks was something of profound moral beauty. They heard from the angels a message of transcendent hope. It was so good, so beautiful, so powerful.

And so, these men who were at the lowest rung of the social order – for example, not eligible to give testimony in a court of law – and beyond that they were just plain filthy – these men found themselves elevated by the message. Two thousand years later we are still talking about them and celebrating them and honoring them and allowing our children to dress up like them in the Christmas program.

It’s remarkable when you think about it. The message of the angels and the things those shepherds saw in Bethlehem elevated their hearts into a realm of hope and joy that they had never known before. They wanted to be different people because of what they saw and heard that night.

And they were different people! They became the first evangelists. Think of it. They were the first witnesses to start telling the gospel story. Luke tells us that everyone was amazed at **“what the shepherds said.”** Their sense of moral and spiritual elevation was contagious. It quickly began to spread to a great many people.

And what did the shepherds say? We’re not told, exactly, but they probably repeated what the angels had said. They talked about peace and hope. They used words like **“savior”** and **“Christ the Lord.”** It’s the same story we’ve been telling this whole Advent season. It’s the same story people have been telling every year since that first Christmas.

There's one line from the angel that I want you to remember this morning. I think it captures the essence of the good news. **“To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”**

I think that if we were to understand that one line, just those few words, that we would find ourselves lifted up, and elevated, and moved to live our lives differently.

Think of it this way: when we receive a birth announcement, when I stand at the front of the church, as I did quite often this fall, and announce that a baby is born and that a family in our congregation is celebrating the arrival of a new son or daughter, I typically say it in a certain way. You can kind of predict how it goes.

When I called my family and Susan's family after the birth of our first child, all I said was, **“It's a girl.”** And I didn't have to say anything more. I *couldn't* say anymore. I cried, but they understood.

What no one ever says to announce the birth of a baby – not in any culture with which I am familiar – what no one ever says is, **“To you a daughter is born, to you a son is given.”** If I had called my parents and said, **“To you a grand-daughter has been born,”** they would have thought, **“Well, Doug didn't get much sleep last night.”**

You know where I'm going with this, don't you?

The way the angel made the birth announcement is – and always has been – astonishing. **“To you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior who is the Messiah.”**

In the Greek – this is the only reference to the Greek that you're going to hear from me this Christmas – in the Greek, the personal pronoun “you” is plural and it's in the dative case. English, as you know, has no dative case, but many languages do, including German. And when they do, the dative is for things that come directly to another person – or in this case a group of people.

At Christmas I give this gift to you! And really to *all* of you! This is for you. This baby is for you. He has come *to* and *for* all of us.

And when the shepherds heard that – I want you to notice this too – when the shepherds heard that, they didn't say, **“Hey, let's go to Bethlehem and find out if it's true. Let's go and find out if it really happened.”**

We might have said that, I can imagine saying it myself, but they didn't say that. Instead, they said, **“Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that *has happened*...which the angel has made known to us.”**

Remarkable, isn't it? No doubt in their minds. It happened. And now the only thing to do was to go and see it for themselves.

I must tell you that for me Christmas never gets old. This message never gets old.

Christmas has changed a great deal over the years. I used to come out of my skin with excitement counting down the days to Christmas. I couldn't wait to see the presents under the tree. I loved to get presents. What child doesn't?

And now, the presents that I receive from family members show up on the credit statement. I end up paying for the gifts I receive. And of course that means receiving gifts is not the highlight of the season anymore for me.

But the wonder of the season has never gone away. Hearing Handel's *Messiah* as we did last week in worship, listening to a couple of our home groups sing the carols for residents of Altersheimen in Mannedorf and Meilen, holding my candle at the Christmas Eve service last night, putting up the tree and handling the ornaments which I attach to the tree every year – these are ways that we enter into the mystery and wonder of the season.

Last week, on Thursday night, at about 6:00, I did something that I had never done before. I stood along the Limmat River with a few thousand other people, and I watched as hundreds of candles floated down the river – *Lichterschwimmen*.

No one said anything. There were thousands of people on the bridges and along the sides of the river, and it was mostly quiet, eerily quiet, which is remarkable in itself. There was no applause. People simply stood in silence and watched these candles float away into the night.

And when it was over, we simply walked away.

And I thought, **“You know, we human beings are capable of seeing and recognizing beauty. We may be the only form of life on the planet which can do that. We know what it means to feel wonder and awe. We have the capacity – you and I – to be quiet and to see beauty in something so simple and unexpected.”**

This is what the shepherds did that night. Silently they listened to the angels. And they watched as a whole multitude of the heavenly host joined that first angel, and they listened – these shepherds listened – to the most beautiful chorus that the world has ever known.

And when they picked themselves up, they were changed men, no longer the same people, and they had to do something in response to what they had heard and seen. And so, they marched off to Bethlehem to see what the angels had been singing about. And they talked about it, first with each other and then with anyone who would listen. They repeated the words they had heard.

And all marveled at what the shepherds said.

I don't know if you've ever thought about this before, but we do this every week when we come to worship. We hear the word spoken and we hear the angels sing. And when it is over, we are changed people. And there is only one thing we can do. And that's to get up and do something about it. We have to tell someone, anyone, who will listen to us.

It's so beautiful, so powerful, so wonderful. This news is a great joy to all people. To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

Let's stand and sing “Joy to the World.”