

CHRISTMAS 2017
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Bells on bobtail ring, making spirits bright, what fun it is to ride and sing a sleighing song tonight! Oh, Jingle bells....

There is so much that I love about Christmas. I love Christmas songs. I love Christmas cookies. I love the tacky house lights. I love Christmas cookies. I love the presents. I love Christmas cookies.

I have always loved Christmas songs. I LOVED to sing Jingle Bells when I was a kid. But, as I look back on it, I realize that there were many times that I would be singing a Christmas song, but I had no idea what the words meant.

For instance, in Jingle Bells, we sing “bells on bobtail ring.” But how many of you can tell me just what the heck a bobtail is? For awhile I thought he was one of the children on that old TV show, “The Waltons.” Some of you remember. “Good night, Grandpa. Good night, Johnboy. Goodnight, Jim Bob. Good night, Bob Tail.”

This word confusion happened in some of my favorite carols too. “Hark the herald angels sing.” For a while, I thought that we were singing about a particular angel named “Harold.” He must have been one of the archangels – the angel Gabriel, Raphael, and the angel Harold.

My favorite Christmas carol is “Silent Night.” But one year after midnight mass, I was very quiet in the car on the way home. So mom asked me, “Mikey, what’s the matter?” And I asked her, Mom, “why do we sing about a guy named ‘Round John Virgin?” She told me to ask my father.

I loved the words. But I didn’t always know what they meant.

Which brings me to one more “Christmas” word. You hear it every year when the Nativity story is proclaimed to you. That word is ‘swaddle.’

In Luke’s magnificent account of the birth of the Messiah, he tells us that Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem in order to fulfill the requirements of Caesar’s census. It became time for Mary to give birth. And since there was no room for them in the place where travelers lodged, she gave birth in the dusty, smelly, place where the animals were fed, and she laid him in the manger (there’s another one of those strange words. A manger is a wooden trough where the animal eat).

But before MARY did that, she wrapped Jesus, the Messiah, in “swaddling clothes.” When I was a kid, I thought that sounded so cute. Swaddling clothes. But I had absolutely no idea what that meant.

It wasn't until much later that a mother filled me in on the details. As I understand it, when you swaddle a baby, you wrap layer after layer of cloth around them, so that the baby cannot move at all. You are completely bound, so that you are fully dependent on someone else for everything. If you need something to drink, if you want to roll over, if you want to scratch your nose, someone else has to do it for you. Because you are helpless. You cannot do for yourself. You are swaddled.

Now, if Luke tells us that *Jesus* was swaddled, he wants us to understand something important. So think about this: we Christians believe that Jesus is the Son of God. We believe that he is *God In The Flesh*, fully human and fully divine. And *that* Jesus is swaddled. Which means that the God of the Universe was willing to become completely dependent on someone else.

Do you hear that?

By being swaddled, Jesus is willing to enter into all of our experiences when *we* feel bound up. Jesus is willing to identify with all of the moments in our life when we feel helpless, or unable to do for ourselves.

Jesus is willing to be swaddled, *because you and I often feel swaddled*. When we are kids, we know that we are dependent on others – to feed us, to protect us, to make the bad dreams go away. So when we are young, Jesus is with us in those moments of dependency.

As we grow, things happen in life which make us feel swaddled, or helpless. Like when we tried our best, but we don't get accepted. When we work hard, but don't make the grade. When the person we love breaks our heart, and there is nothing we can do to get them back. When our family is not what we hoped it would be. When addiction grabs hold of us. In those moments of helplessness, Christ is with us.

Life binds us up and swaddles us at times. Like when an accident leaves us, or a loved one, unable to do what we used to do. Or when fears about world events or political tensions grip us with fear. Or when we are being treated unfairly, and there is no obvious way to change that. Or when we stand by the bed of a loved one as they take their last breath.

While doctors can work miracles, sometimes there's nothing more they can do. So the person who is sick feels helpless. And loved ones have to sit by, too, unable to fix the problem. In those moments, we can feel swaddled.

We want to make things better for others. We want to help create peace. We want to increase justice for all.

But there are so many moments in life when we feel like our hands are tied... when we are tied up.

Perhaps that is why Jesus was swaddled as a child. Perhaps that is why God was willing to become fully dependent on Mary and Joseph. Perhaps the Christmas story has that tiny detail about the swaddling clothes because the Lord knows how often you and I feel swaddled and helpless.

And perhaps that is where we can begin to find peace, and hope. When anything or anyone binds part of our lives, Christ the Lord is standing right next to us, saying to us: “I know how it feels to feel helpless. I know how it feels to be swaddled. And I am here with you, today, to go through this with you.”

Which brings me to one final scriptural point. The Christmas stories, as you know, are found at the beginning of the Gospels. So the Gospel begins with this image of Jesus wrapped up in cloth – helpless and dependent. But please remember that, at the end of the Gospel, we hear about ‘swaddling’ clothes again. After his crucifixion, Jesus is once again wrapped in cloth. Not baby cloths, but burial cloths. The women wrapped him tightly in those cloths, and laid him in the tomb.

But then, early on Sunday morning, those cloths were thrown on the floor, and Jesus rises, free and forever. Because of God’s eternal love, not even the tight bonds of death could hold Jesus. The tomb could not hold Jesus. Nothing could hold Jesus.

And *that* Jesus, who is free and faithful, is with us today in this Eucharist. He wants to undo what binds you, and heal what hurts you, unwind what grips you, and forgive what aches you. The Prince of Peace wants you to have peace, and our world to have peace. Not even death could tie him down. Nothing can hold us down, either. And that is worth celebrating, in every season of the year!

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