

This will be a sign to you

- Luke 2:1-8
- A student of mine recently gave a persuasive speech about God. And it was a really good apologetic for the existence of God, but he had one funny part in it, when he talked about ways God had revealed himself to him. He said he was in line to order at Moe's and deliberating whether to add guacamole to his meal, since it cost extra. He decided not to, but then saw the Moe's employee put the green stuff on his meal anyway. He didn't know what to do! *Should I tell the cashier or keep quiet about it?* He thought. Then he prayed: "God, what should I do?" That's when he knew he heard God speak to him and say, "Tell the truth." So, he did. The cashier thanked him for his honesty, charged him for the guacamole, and when his meal rang up, the total was \$12.12. He just *knew* that was a sign and he couldn't wait to get out to his car and open his Bible. He searched for verses that had the 12:12 address until he found it. Luke 12:12! It reads, "for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say." ☺
- Well...ok, but let's not forget context when we read the Bible, and let's try to avoid mysticism with a little bit of numerology thrown in when we interpret the voice of God! But look at what the angel announced to the shepherds on that night of all nights. He said, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Then the angel announced a sign from God about as plainly as one could possibly be announced: "And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." Let's look at this passage under these three main points: Swaddling cloths, manger, and more swaddling cloths.
- **Swaddling cloths**
- This first sign to the shepherds did not point to poverty, but to commonness. For the economic status of Mary and Joseph, you look at the offering they brought in Luke 2:24 when they presented their son to the Lord. Two turtledoves or two pigeons was the accommodation made in the law of Moses for such a sacrifice, if the couple could not afford a lamb. (Leviticus 12:8)
- But the swaddling cloth? That was customary; every Jewish woman would swaddle her newborn. In a book on manners and customs of Bible times, the author wrote that a birth was normally assisted by a midwife and took place in the home. In this case, of course, Joseph and Mary were forced by Roman decree to travel to Bethlehem for the census, so it seems that Joseph was pressed into duty to deliver this precious baby boy. After a birth in those days, the umbilical cord would be cut, and the baby would be washed. Then the baby was rubbed with salt, because of the belief that salt would harden the skin. After that, the Jewish mother would wrap the baby in swaddling cloths, believing that the limbs would start growing straight and firm if they were bound tightly. It was believed that the baby would sleep better, also, if he was not able to wave his arms around or kick his legs and wake himself up. In a metaphorical passage in Ezekiel 16, where unfaithful Jerusalem is compared to a newborn, God says, "on the day that you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in swaddling cloths. No eye pitied you, to do any of these things out of compassion for you."

- Look for an ordinary baby, the angel said. That's what the swaddling cloths represent: a sign that this child was just like every other baby born of woman in his humanness. He was tiny, and dependent, and needed to be wrapped up and cared for. This baby Jesus needed Mary and Joseph to show compassion on him because God had put on flesh, God had put on human frailty. We sing about it in one of our worship songs: "In Christ alone! – who took on flesh, Fullness of God in helpless babe." Jesus had to be just as we are, yet without sin, in order to make the perfect sacrifice that would take *away* our sin. You will find him wrapped in swaddling cloths, the angel said: just like every other baby! **But** he was also NOT like every other baby. You will find him, the angel said, "lying in a manger."
- **Manger**
- We don't know how many newborns or recent-borns were to be found in Bethlehem that night, but we know with certainty that there was only one baby lying in a manger. If you had visited the little suburb called Old Town, outside of Winston-Salem, in December of 1935, you would have found a little baby girl lying in an orange crate, protected by blankets and hot water bottles that her father had collected from neighbors. That was my mom, born two months pre-mature at home on December 15, delivered by an inebriated doctor who had left a Christmas party to come to the house. After mom was born, the doctor laid her on the bed beside my grandmother and said, "She'll never make it." My grandmother, Nana, said under her breath, "Yes, she will." I'm so glad she did!
- **This** baby that was sent from the glories of heaven was laid in a manger, put down to sleep on hay that the animals would eat. "The arrival of the incarnated Son of God is a study of contrasts between how God did it and how we might have done it," wrote Darrell Bock. Born to a virgin, born to a simple Jewish couple who had no standing in their community and who could not afford a lamb for a sacrifice, born into Roman occupation and control, in a little town that would be visited by shepherds and later by strange men from the east. On top of all of this, we know now what Joseph and Mary did not know, that this baby was born to die. The shadow of the cross was on the manger. Paul wrote, "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners... (1 Tim. 1:15).
- Some of you may have heard the story last week about the family in Raleigh who had put up a 6-foot cross in their yard, with a Christmas bow on it. They live in a subdivision that is governed by an HOA, a Homeowners Association. They were told by their HOA that the cross was not a Christmas decoration, it would only be suitable for Easter or Passover, and had to be removed, unless they wanted to pay a \$100 fine. The homeowner told them that the cross was a symbol of hope and salvation and had everything to do with Christmas. He provided biblical texts to support his argument, since the HOA had challenged him to do so. Maybe he shared this one from Hebrews: "But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone." (Hebrews 2:9) This Christmas gift from God came with a date of execution for the Lamb who was to be slain, foreordained from before creation itself, as Revelation 13:8 tells us. No cross at Christmas!? Then

Christmas was no gift at all. But we know it as a day when the greatest gift of all was born. And that leads us to...

- **More swaddling cloths**

- Luke 2 is the only place in the New Testament that we read about Jesus being bound up in swaddling cloths. Once in verse 7, when we read that's what Mary did, and again in verse 12, when the angel tells the shepherds about it. But it is not the only time Jesus will be bound. John writes that when Jesus was arrested in the garden, he was bound by the soldiers. "So the band of soldiers and their captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound him." (John 18:12) Matthew, Mark and John all report that Jesus was bound again and led away when he was delivered over to Caiaphas and then again to Pilate. He was bound not by a mother caring for her child and his comfort, but by rough men who wanted only to see him destroyed. When he was condemned to die and then beaten with a cat of nine tails, Jesus was too weak to carry the cross beam a half mile through the winding roads of Jerusalem to Golgotha, outside the city walls. The Roman soldiers pressed Simon of Cyrene into service, forcing him to walk behind the bloody Savior, carrying his crossbeam for the One who was too weak to do so himself.
- Jesus was bound one final time after his death. When Jesus had breathed his last, announcing with a cry, "It is finished!" two men took him down from the cross and wrapped him in linen cloths. John's gospel uses the same word here that he used for Jesus' arrest when he writes, "So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews." (John 19:40)
- Luke and John both mention the linen cloths again, this time "folded up in a place by itself." (John 20:7). Luke says Peter saw the linen cloths by themselves, not wrapped around Jesus' dead body, "and he went home marveling at what had happened." (Luke 24:12)
- Wrapped up like any other baby in swaddling cloths by a mother who loved him. Bound tight like any other dead man in linen cloths by friends who had trusted and followed him. But he left those grave clothes and he rose in power as the Son of God who came to conquer sin, death and the grave to pay for our sins and to win our redemption! That's how we can sing with full volume and with great joy,
- There in the ground His body lay,
Light of the world by darkness slain:
Then bursting forth in glorious day
Up from the grave He rose again
And as He stands in victory
Sin's curse has lost its grip on me,
For I am His and He is mine
Bought with the precious blood of Christ
- Prayer