

*Gift-Wrapped God*

**Luke 2:1-20**

John Breon

Christmas Eve 2018

Gifts and gift-giving are a big part of our Christmas celebrations. In other cultures, ancient and modern, gifts are given at various festivals. Gift-giving as part of celebrating Christmas is inspired particularly by the Magi giving gifts to the infant Jesus. I heard once about a little boy who was learning about Christmas. He said, "It's Jesus' birthday, and I get gifts? Is this a great religion, or what!"

Part of gift-giving in our culture is wrapping the gifts. Wrapping paper got its start in China, where paper was invented centuries ago. The Hall brothers, who founded Hallmark, made colorful paper popular in America. In 1917, they were selling tissue paper as gift wrap in their store in Kansas City. When they sold out, they started selling envelope lining that they had imported from France. And it sold out. We've been using paper with colorful designs to wrap presents ever since.

I recently learned about the Japanese art of *furoshiki*. Feudal lords needed a practical way to bundle their belongings while using the shogun bathhouse, and they displayed their family crests on the outer cloth to identify whose was whose. Over the centuries, people adapted *furoshiki* into a beautiful means of presenting gifts. The cloth is folded and tied in deliberate, creative ways, inviting the recipient to pause and appreciate the thoughtfulness behind the packaging before opening it. Making a gift more personal and showing that time and thought and effort went into it seems to be one reason we wrap gifts. And some psychologists suggest that wrapping gifts can put you in a good mood.

In *furoshiki*, the fabric, unlike paper, can be reused over and over. Now, let's think about God's great gift of himself in Jesus Christ. Jesus came to us in *furoshiki*, wrapped in cloths. Those strips of swaddling served their original purpose long ago. Along with the manger, the swaddling cloths were a sign to the shepherds so they could identify the newborn Savior who is the Messiah and Lord. Can God continue to reuse them over and

over? Can the swaddling cloths of Jesus continue to be a sign to us? Can they tell us something about who he is and what he does? (see <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/december/christmas-wrapping-furoshiki.html?fbclid=IwAR2GAIADtpBlGj4Dm3zW1tKw87U2KgcSY1NmKjNM6UvPn7Rfcnt8Q95CD14;> [https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/12/wrappers-delight-a-brief-history-of-wrapping-paper/266599/;](https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/12/wrappers-delight-a-brief-history-of-wrapping-paper/266599/) <https://www.npr.org/2017/12/23/573217009/the-history-of-gift-wrap>)

The practice of swaddling is found in many cultures and it dates to the earliest civilizations. Archaeologists have found tiny carved figurines of swaddled babies that date to thousands of years before Christ. For centuries, parents believed that wrapping infants tightly in place helped their limbs grow straighter. There's also a kind of security in being held like that. And it keeps babies from flailing around and waking themselves up. Swaddling fell out of fashion in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but it's become popular again. A year ago, Rachel and Zach were swaddling Charlie—and they got good at it.

Practiced properly, swaddling provides that sense of security. On the other hand, according to some studies, excessively restricting movement can distress a child. One writer tells about his discovery of meaning in the swaddling of Jesus:

I can imagine Jesus in that manger, arms and legs straining against the unyielding bonds. What must it be like for a baby—particularly this baby, God incarnate—to be unable to move in any direction, held fast...? What must it have been like to have [his] world shrunk and narrowed so severely?

And here is where the light dawned in my darkness. This historical detail from Christ's birth suddenly transformed into a personal sign for me. Because I no longer saw just a baby in a blanket, but a God who entered into my boundedness, who shared inside knowledge of all I was feeling. This was part of his gift to me, tucked away like hidden treasure in the folds of furoshiki, waiting to be discovered. (Peabody 45)

I think of a Charles Wesley Christmas hymn:

Let earth and heaven combine  
Angels and men agree,  
To praise in songs divine  
The incarnate deity,  
Our God contracted to a span  
Incomprehensibly made man.

He laid His glory by.  
He wrapped Him in our clay,  
Unmarked by human eye,  
The latent Godhead lay;  
Infant of days He here became,  
And bore the mild Immanuel's name.

(Cited in William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*,  
218)

God "gift-wrapped" himself when God the Son gave himself in Jesus Christ. Can you imagine God squeezing into a human cell, growing inside a human mother, being born a human baby? He entered fully into our human life to show us who God is and to show us who we can be by God's grace.

The conditions of Jesus' birth, of his entering the world, are a small picture of his entire life. As he became flesh and bone, he limited himself. He allowed himself to be restricted by time and space. "Having a human body was like being swaddled, as it contained Almighty God in unnaturally small dimensions" (Peabody).

Michael Card describes some of this in one of his songs:

Long ago He blessed the earth  
Born older than the years  
And in the stall the cross He saw  
Through the first of many tears  
A life of homeless wandering

Cast out in sorrow's way  
The Shepherd seeking for the lost  
His life the price He paid  
(“Love, Crucified, Arose,” *Legacy*, 1983)

Then, when Jesus grew up and went to lay down his life, he was bound and remained bound from one trial to another (John 18:12, 14). On the cross, nails restrained him. But, as many have said, what really held him to the cross was his love, his willingness to remain there, “fully immobilized on our behalf” (Peabody).

We all have to face limitations. What binds you? What seems to be holding you and restricting you—keeping you from being all God wants you to be? Holding you back from the full abundant life Jesus came to give?

Jeff Peabody, who wrote the article where I got a lot of the ideas for this message, tells about being diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). He says that his struggle with OCD highlighted the anxiety that filled him. He talks about the limits we all face. It may be an anxiety disorder like his. Maybe it’s the stifling experience of a job where your best skills aren’t used. It could be a broken family system that ties you up. Maybe you’ve made choices in the past and their consequences still choke and bind. It may be an addiction that makes us feel powerless. “We all suffer the inescapable reality of sin and its fallout in this broken world. And we can relate to the psalmist when he described the cords of the grave coiling around him (Ps. 18:5).”

The simple image of Jesus, God’s gift to us, being wrapped up in cloths comforts me with the powerful truth: He understands the bindings on my mind and soul as only someone who has a shared experience can. The concept of Immanuel, God with us, takes on a new and profound clarity.

God with us limits himself, allows himself to be bound, to be restrained, to share our bondage and then to set us free.

The manger isn't the only time God allows himself to be wrapped in "furoshiki." "At the end of his earthly life, Jesus, our gift, was laid in a tomb, carefully and lovingly wrapped in strips of cloth" (Peabody).

But the story ends with Jesus made alive again. He sets aside the cloths and leaves them behind in the tomb. The wrappings are discarded and the gift is fully ours. Jesus "broke the power of the bindings that had held him in a death grip and emerged into complete and total freedom" (Peabody).

This is the hope that I claim as I reflect on the sign of the manger. It is no small thing that Jesus identified with us in his humanity, joining us in our confinement. I need a Savior who I know understands my struggles in such a personal way.

But it is a far greater wonder that he promises a glorious freedom from our own swaddling. The cloths will be set aside. As the restraints are beginning to loosen for me now, I look forward to the day we will leave behind all that currently binds. The day we can fully take in the greatness of the gift of God himself, no longer veiled by furoshiki [wrappings] of any kind. (Peabody)

Jesus, wrapped and laid in a manger, is God with us. He shares our life and shows us a new way to live. He is still, right now, God with us. He's the way to forgiveness and new life. He's the source of freedom and power to live the way God intends. His birth, his life, his death for us, his resurrection, his present life with us through the Holy Spirit, and the promise of his return in glory—all of that is "good news of great joy for all the people" (Lk 2:10).

God invites you to receive the greatest gift—himself, life with God. We're called to respond to God's gracious gift by putting our faith and trust in him and giving ourselves to him.

Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another. Therefore, let us confess our sin before God and one another.

**Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your name. Amen.**

Hear the good news: Christ died for us while we were yet sinners; that proves God's love toward us. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven, unbound, set free!

**In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!**

**Glory to God. Amen.**

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**

Lift up your hearts

**We lift them up to the Lord**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

**It is right to give our thanks and praise.**

It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. You created light out of darkness and brought forth life on the earth. You formed us in your image and breathed into us the breath of life. When we turned away, and our love failed, your love remained steadfast. You delivered us from captivity, made covenant to be our sovereign God, and spoke to us through your prophets. In the fullness of time you gave your only Son Jesus Christ

to be our Savior, and at his birth the angels sang glory to you in the highest and peace to your people on earth.

And so, with your people on earth and all the company of heaven we praise your name and join their unending hymn:

**Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,  
heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest.  
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the  
highest.**

Holy are you and blessed is your Son Jesus Christ. As Mary and Joseph went from Galilee to Bethlehem and there found no room, so Jesus went from Galilee to Jerusalem and was despised and rejected. As in the poverty of a stable Jesus was born, so by the baptism of his suffering, death and resurrection you gave birth to your Church, delivered us from slavery to sin and death, and made with us a new covenant by water and the Spirit. As your Word became flesh, born of a woman, on that night long ago, so, on the night in which he gave himself up for us, he took bread, gave thanks to you, broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said: "Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

When the supper was over he took the cup, gave thanks to you, gave it to his disciples, and said: "Drink from this, all of you; for this is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." And so, in remembrance of these your mighty acts in Jesus Christ, we offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving as a holy and living sacrifice, in union with Christ's offering for us, as we proclaim the mystery of faith.

**Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.**

Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and wine. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may

be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood. By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory, and we feast at his heavenly banquet. Through your Son Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit in your holy Church, all honor and glory is yours, almighty God, now and for ever.

**Amen.**

And now, with the confidence of children of God, we pray together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.**