

The Feast of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ
December 31, 2017
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Pope Pius the Twelfth once described the contemporary Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth as the most important theologian since Thomas Aquinas. Karl Barth, a prolific theologian who died in 1968, was once invited to be a guest lecturer at the university of Chicago Divinity School. At the end of Barth's lecture, the president of the seminary said that Barth, not in the best health and quite exhausted, should not have to endure the countless questions students wanted to ask. He explained, "Therefore, I will ask just one question on our behalf." Turning to Barth, the president asked, "Of all the theological insights you have ever had, which do you consider to be the greatest of them all?" Suddenly, the room fell silent. Barth, himself, sat silently, eyes closed for a moment as he thought. Students were on the edge of their seats ready to hear this prominent theologian's appraisal of the greatest insight he had ever encountered. In moments, a smile flickered across his face as he turned to the audience of seminarians and explained, "The greatest theological insight I have ever had is this: 'Jesus loves me, this is know, for the Bible tells me so.'"

This is the Christmas message. Today is not simply the commemoration of a birth, but it is truly a wedding day. It is the commemoration of a cosmic love story, of God whose love for his Creation was so profound, that in Christ's birth, God the Son comes to dwell among us, as one of us. Today we gather in celebration of the wedding of humanity and divinity in the child Christ. All that is human-- the frail, the small, the confined, the sweat and tears....on this holy day over two millennia ago, all that was human was wed to the might of the Divine. Just as in the language of a wedding ceremony the two become one, so in Christ, the fullness of Humanity and Divinity are united in this sacred mystery of the God-man, the Christ who comes to us as a humble, needy child.

I have read today's Gospel lesson many times in preparation for this sermon and find myself continually struck by awe at a small image—an image which I simply cannot get past. In fact, I am left restrained by this image, its self-evident beauty ministers to my heart so deeply that as I try to unpack it I am confronted by its timeless simplicity, this mystery before which all words recoil.

I come today with no wisdom to share, no special knowledge, no witty ideas, or funny stories—I stand here only in awe to testify and in hope that my words impart nothing but a stirring up of awe at the mystery of God's birth. In my meditation on today's Gospel lesson, I was struck by something which seemed small at first, but as I unpacked it, it became more and more a symbol of the mystery of Christ's birth. The phrase that continually captured my attention were the "bands of cloth" or "swaddling cloth" in the old translation.

In ancient times a newborn infant was bound so tightly that he would not be able to move his limbs. Many cultures felt this was a good practice to ensure they grew straight and proper. This is still done today, in a less severe way, with clothes tightly wrapped around the child to comfort it. When Jesus was born he was not just laid comfortably in a manger, he was born, and bound, helpless, immovable, powerless. The Almighty laid powerless in the first moments of his earthly existence. I wonder, what was that experience like for God. Have you ever gone from a situation of comfort and spaciousness to a more confined situation? From a queen bed to single bed; an exit row seat on a airplane to a regular seat; a larger salary to one smaller; or a spacious home to a smaller one. Now imagine for a moment you what it would be like to be timeless—past, present, and future do not confine and restrict you. You are above all things, your spirit is in all things and through all things. At your word glaciers shift and mountains rise, rains fall and stars are born. And now, imagine a young woman, pregnant with a child. Imagine, for a moment, the Almighty, God, that boundless one whom you just imagined yourself as, confined and become an infant... a slippery, squirmy, newborn baby. And if that is not confining enough, that child, at his first breath, the first moment of taking in the very atmosphere which he created, he is bound and powerless, the Creator of all dependent and swaddled in the arms of his mother.

This is the mystery of Christmas. The swaddling of God. In the Holy Eucharist, as the bread and wine are prepared there is an ancient prayer the priest says over the wine and water that has etched itself onto my heart. It reads, “By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.” I pray that we may come to this altar together, brought to our knees in awe at the Eternal One who entered the confines of time, the All Powerful One who became Powerless, the Almighty who became lowly, so that we he might relate to us, and that we might relate to him, that we might know Him more deeply, and that he, entering our frail condition, might guide us out from the bondage of this life, into divine life with Him.