

Wrapped in Swaddling Clothes

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This detail from Giotto's timeless *Nativity* fresco of Mary caressing her newly born child Jesus, who is lovingly wrapped in swaddling clothes, invites us to enter into the pathos of this tender scene. As our gaze centres on Mary and her baby, we are attracted into the enfolding intimacy of the exchange of love between mother and child. The natural softness of colour, the interplay of light and shadow, the encircling flow of arms holding and placing the babe in a manger, and the tenderness of the touch draw us beyond the physicality of the figures, into soul awareness, into union of spirit with Spirit. Delicately, the swathing of Mary's garments entices us into her heart, while the enfolding - enclosing movement of the swaddling clothes on Jesus draws us into his heart. In entering into the ever-attentive deep affection of Mary gazing at her child, any separation we may feel as observer dissolves into beholding, into the endlessness of love oneing us to Love's self. Enraptured, we are immersed in an enduring sense of presence, of wonder, of grace.



In Giotto's later *Nativity*, the swaddling is even more intensely highlighted. Notice how the enfolding intimacy of Mary's blue garments creates a sense of the child, still within Mary's womb and at the same time, born. The gaze between mother and child is so gentle, still, silent, stable, permanent. All we can do is behold, and in the oneing, become one with their gaze. We become be-holding.

Giotto's Nativities are influenced by Luke's gospel scene where uniquely, Luke invites us to participate in the wonder of the incarnation, by painting a sensually vivid scene of a mother wrapping a newborn child in swaddling clothes, lying her vulnerable babe in a manger (Luke 2:7). Luke then declares the salvific nature of this birth, as an angel's words to shepherds in the field ring endlessly throughout creation. They touch deep into our hearts: "Do not be afraid. I bring you great joy! ... You will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes (*ἐσπαργανωμένον* *esparganōmenon*), (*involvit*) lying in a manger." (Luke 2:10-12). Do not be afraid, the angel tells the shepherds. Bask in joy. Luke intentionally places us, as readers, within a point in time, organically grounding us in the natural earthiness of this stable scene, whilst also immersing us within the thinness of this liminal space where time and eternity kiss. Luke opens us to the wonder and joy of the evolutionary nature of this birthing.



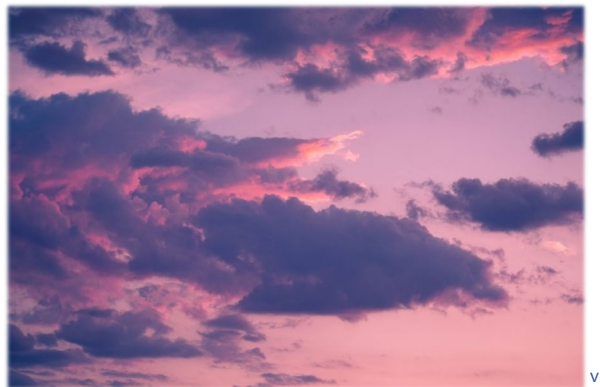
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Luke's particular emphasis on the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes is touching. In his day, the swaddling of a child was a natural, ritual-like tradition that all Palestinian mothers would sensitively do for a newborn. To swaddle (*ἐσπαργανωμένον* *esparganōmenon*) is to wrap and enfold a child in strips of cloth, creating womb-like security and safety. The later Latin Vulgate translation (*involvit*) also stresses the sense of involution, of rolling up, or gathering together into oneself, being *inwrapped* or *infolded*. Thus, the swaddling illuminates the naturalness of this birth, the vulnerability of the child needing care and protection, and the ever-sensitive responsiveness of the mother. It also points to the sense of this birth as an involution, of all things being rolled, gathered, or swaddled into this tiny child.

Over the centuries, as the pondering of this scene has naturally unfolded from *lectio, meditatio, oratio* into *contemplatio* in the hearts of pray-ers, we appreciate how this scene mirrors and expands luminous imagery from the *Book of Wisdom*. In the ode to wisdom, Solomon proclaims the sacredness of his humanity:

when I was born, I began to breathe the common air,
and fell upon the kindred earth,
and my first sound was a cry, like the cry of all.
I was nursed with great care in swaddling clothes. (Wis 7:4)
(*Ἐν omapyavois dvetpddynv ka év povriow* - Original Greek)
(*In involumentis nutritus sum, et curis Magnis* - Latin Vulgate) ^{iv}

Like Solomon, this babe wrapped in swaddling clothes is of the earth, breathing the air we breathe, crying as we cry, being nursed with care as we have been nursed. Then, dissolving all limiting images of what it means to be human and what it means to be divine, we see, taste, touch, smell, hear, sense how the human babe is an expression of divine Wisdom. This chapter in the *Book of Wisdom* continues to stress how Wisdom “is the brightness of everlasting light, an unspotted mirror of the power of God, the image of divine goodness.” (Wis 7:27). This swaddled child, enfolded in the clothes of humanity, given birth to and nurtured with love from a human heart, radiantly mirrors the power of God. We are reminded that Wisdom is “one and can do all things.” Moreover, remaining in herself, she “makes all things new.” Astoundingly, in every age, in this moment now, Wisdom “enters into holy souls, making us friends of God, and prophets.” (Wis 7:28). This babe wrapped in swaddling clothes is the Wisdom of God entering into our souls, enabling us to be friends, lovers, prophets. Now, as we behold this infant, we see that here is the Wisdom of God.



The cosmic nature of this moment is further affirmed in foretelling echoes from the *Book of Job*, when the All Holy One speaks personally to Job out of a storm. All our mystical senses are awakened as we are serenaded by the song the morning stars and the joy of angels proclaiming (Job 38:8). Reverberations with Luke’s scene are obvious. Subsequently, the Creator of all asks Job, and us:

Who shut in the sea behind doors
when it burst forth from the womb
when I made the clouds its garment
and swaddled (ׁוּתְלַתְּוּ *hă-tul-lā-tōw*) it
in thick darkness? (Job 38:8-9).

We can vividly picture the marvel of the sea bursting forth from the divine womb and being clothed in clouds, swaddled in impenetrable darkness. At the same time, there is a mystical awareness that in keeping with this sense of creation being swaddled, this swaddling of the

newly born child is a continuous expression of cosmic divine creativity. God is endlessly sharing God's self. Furthermore, God's giving expression to God's self in and through creation reaches a climax in the birth of Jesus.

This enfolding, enclosing, encircling movement of swaddling feels so critical this Christmas as the anguish, terror and heart ache of unspeakable pain keeps magnifying. We feel immersed in tragedy. While climate concerns loom, we have the heartbreak of the recent *Voice* referendum in Australia, ongoing wars in parts of Africa, the invasion of Ukraine and a brutal conflict between Palestine and Israel. We are confronted ever more starkly with the death-dealing disturbances of our collective shadow caused by unhealed collective trauma. We can feel afraid, powerless and voiceless. Even more concerning, in the face of all this discord, the image of the swaddled babe can feel meaningless. Still, this is the very point Luke wants to make. There is power in this vulnerability. There is creativity in this simplicity. There is divine Love in this loving.

For me, the words of Clare of Assisi give counsel: "Embrace the Poor Christ" (*sed pauperem Christum, amplectere*).^{vi} Thankfully, it is natural to want to embrace this vulnerable child who draws us into the story of Jesus of Nazareth, into the transforming love of paschal living, dying and rising, into the Christ self. Then, held in this paschal embrace, we can embrace our vulnerable world. Gradually, through prayer, our embrace of the child and our embrace of the world becomes a mutual embrace, until there are no longer two, or three, but one. Clare invites us to hold our wounded world within the embrace of the Poor One.



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In working with unresolved conflict Miroslav Volf calls for: "a phenomenology of embrace."^{viii} Phenomenology is concerned with our consciousness, our experience of life. It takes our sensual awareness seriously. What we see, taste, smell, touch, hear, and feel matters. However, in order to truly enable us to embrace all this unnecessary suffering in our world, I wish to emphasise that we must also include our mystical sense awareness, the deep spiritual knowing of our heart. As our heart ways of knowing sensitize, we can become ever more attentive to any shadows, or wars raging in our own heart, bring them into the light of love and feel all

disparate parts of our selves knit and oned in Love. This necessary integration then creates a loving, inner spaciousness, that has room for others in pain.

In seeking then to embrace this world heartache, I invite us, as a CEN community, to embrace this vulnerable swaddled child who is the Wisdom of God. And as we yield into an embrace, we open our hearts and create a space in ourselves for others to come in. Compassionately, we sense the pain with our heart senses and enfold all this world suffering into our mutual embrace with the child. We create a sense of swaddling, of enfolding and enclosing, of binding together. We remain open and ready to risk a new way of being in communion until we realize there are no "others". We are all one. The courage to feel and the patience to wait is essential. Gently, reverently, compassionately we hold our hearts open, until the embrace becomes a reciprocal self-sharing, an enfolding, a swaddling of all this pain in love. This way of embrace then opens us into the freedom of the possibility of deeper mutual embrace as we are prepared to allow ourselves to be embraced. We experience true communion.

So, in the face of all this pain we embrace the pain, draw it into our heart, into the swaddling, and hold and integrate the conflict in an ever embracing, enfolding love. Delicately, sensitivity we wait, yielding into the *kenosis* of loving, becoming more and more one in the oneing.



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As the swaddling movement around the newly born Jesus draws us into its enfolding, encircling, all encompassing, enclosing love in mystical union, the extravagance of divine Love expressed in this incarnation just keeps deepening and expanding, enabling us to draw all this suffering into the divine embrace. In this involution, we come to know through our oneness in love that here is humanity at its most vulnerable. Here is divine Wisdom at its most powerful. Here is unimaginable divine creativity evolving. When we consciously give the whole of ourselves to this swaddling, enfolding, enclosing all in God, we give all the love of our heart, all our energy, all our creativity to the possibility of world peace. We participate in and continue the work of incarnation. We live oned within the infinite creativity, the possibility and the wisdom of God.

ⁱ Giotto, *Nativity*, c. 1304-1306. Wikki Commons.

ⁱⁱ Giotto, *Nativity*, c. 1315. Wikki Commons.

ⁱⁱⁱ Source unknown.

^{iv} Ancient Greek and Latin Text, See, *The Book of Wisdom: the Greek Text, the Latin Vulgate and the Authorised English Version*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1881). Internet Archive.

^v <https://unsplash.com/photos/clouds-illuminated-with-sunlight-at-sunset-Qj8CvonsYnM>

^{vi} *Clare's Letter to Agnes*. Letter 2.17-18.

^{vii} Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Madonna and Child* c.1319.

^{viii} Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1996), 141-147.

^{ix} Gerard van Honthorst, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, c.1622. Wikki Commons.