



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL  
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
Stockbridge, Massachusetts

## *Swaddled*

**September 8, 2019**

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18 <sup>1</sup>O LORD, you have searched me and known me. <sup>2</sup>You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. <sup>3</sup>You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. <sup>4</sup>Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. <sup>5</sup>You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. <sup>6</sup>Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. <sup>13</sup>For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

<sup>14</sup>I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. <sup>15</sup>My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. <sup>16</sup>Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. <sup>17</sup>How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! <sup>18</sup>I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.

SERMON: It was not his choice. But the Bible tells us it was the very first choice made for him. Jesus did not ask for it, but Luke records this: That when Mary had given birth to him, when Mary had given birth to love incarnate, to the savior of the whole world, the very first choice that she made for him was to swaddle him, to wrap him in bands of cloth, over and under, around and about, to carefully and completely wrap up that tiny child in the softest thing she could find and lay him in the softest place available, that manger of hay.

Swaddling does many wonderful things for infants. It does some physical things: it help keep the body temperature steady. It provides a slight pressure on the skin, sort of like an ongoing hug that makes that baby feel safe and secure. It also, though, serves to protect the child from itself. You know – when you're sleeping sometimes your body involuntarily moves – the startle reflex, they call it. Being swaddled, being clothed so tightly, also keeps the baby from waking itself up, or from inflicting any harm on its tender body. Swaddling protects the baby from things from within and without.

I still remember how peacefully little Jakey slept when he was swaddled. Unlike Mary, who had to figure out how to do it herself, we were blessed that they now make swaddling blankets, complete with instructions and Velcro, to make sure that you get it just right. I still remember the shocked look on my stepfather's face. He is a bit claustrophobic, you see, and he couldn't believe the torture we were inflicting upon our child, wrapping him up so tightly. The truth was the more thoroughly and tightly Jakey was wrapped, the more comfortable he was, the more safe, the more love he felt, and so the better he slept. And I have to tell you that to this day, even now in his big boy bed with his real sheet and his real comforter, he still sleeps best when he is completely and thoroughly tucked in. And by that, I mean literally. He asks to have his sheets and comforter pulled so tightly down between mattress and box spring that the boy can barely move. And there nose to nose with Walter, his bear, he falls asleep. Bands of cloth over and under, around and about. Jakey, you see, now chooses to be surrounded, to be swaddled, because he still knows and yearns for that safety and security, protected from things both within and without. And by the way, because of it, he sleeps – oh, how he sleeps – the way I so wish that I might sleep. But even more, I wish that Jake continues to make this decision of recognizing the value and importance of being surrounded, over and under, around and about, for that is the way to live.

Now I know that part of growing up is that each of us wants to stretch our legs and find our freedom, that part of the gift of God is a freedom to do and to choose as we want, to move as we want, even if it is at night, always trying to find that elusive perfect spot in the mattress we never quite find, tossing and turning through the night. The same is true of our waking hours, too. We sometimes strive and yearn for freedom, to discover ourselves, to choose our own direction, choose our own adventure, make our own life. And that is good, and that is well, and it is part of growing up.

Here on Rally Day, there is such a joy in watching those kids of all ages go back with the adults who have chosen to care for them, the adults who have chosen to wrap those children over and under, around and about, in the knowledge and love of God, just like the Gospel of Luke tells us Mary did for her child long after she stopped literally swaddling him. Because, you see, Mary taught her son, because she knew one day Jesus would grow out of his swaddle, that one day he would kick off his covers, and go out into the world to make his own choices. Mary knew that one day what she could choose for him would give way to what he would choose for himself. And so, not just in swaddling clothes, she wrapped Jesus over and under, she prayed over that child, she gave him the foundation of the story of her people and their love affair with God, so that when Jesus went out and about in the world he would choose to swaddle himself, choose always to be surrounded by God's love, always to abide in the weight of God's thoughts, always to follow in the path laid out before him by God.

The truth is that our faith proclaims loud and clear that we do have a choice. Each of

us has a fundamental choice about how we respond to this good news we hear every day. Paul writes that, in fact, one of the gifts of Christ is one of freedom, of being loosed from any shackles that might hold us in, even the soft loving ones of swaddling clothes. The fundamental question, though, for Paul, and for us, is what do we do with that choice? That is why we send our kids to their classrooms so that we might help them choose with their freedom the right way to go.

This psalm, this amazingly beautiful psalm that Cathy read with clear emotion in her voice, this psalm of God in and around, over and below, the God who knows everything that we do, has long been viewed by people of faith, and faithful scholars and teachers, as a psalm of judgment and vindication, largely leaning on how the psalm ends with the phrase “Search me and know me, O God, and know my heart.” This age-old idea of good choices leading to good living, leading to God’s affirmation.

But more recently, scholars and teachers have found a new – I think – more faithful and definitely more beautiful way of approaching this stunning psalm. Instead, this psalm is now being viewed as that Swaddling Blanket. But in this psalm, it moves not from God placing it on us for our own good, but rather a blanket chosen by us, freely with that choice that we have been given. The psalm begins with this stunning claim that God, the author of the universe and the spinner of the planets, is not only just concerned with things huge and impressive, but instead the whole reason behind the cosmos and the amazing thing of creation is all the idea of God’s yearning to be in relationship. Relationship with the likes of you and me, and all who have come before and all who will follow. This psalm proclaims a God who searches out for us to lay a hand upon us in blessing and guidance. The psalm proclaims this kind of relationship with God is one to be found deeply in prayer. So that if there is one thing that you commit to in the beginning of this program year with us all back home, is find a way and a place to pray. You’ll notice though that in the beginning of this psalm the psalmist asserts her distance and her independence. But then with the freedom that comes with every breath she has, she draws closer to God, choosing to follow in God’s way, to be shown not just the way to go, but just as importantly, how to get there.

You see, the final words of this psalm are not about judgment at all. They’re about following. For they read this way: “If there is even an evil bone in me, O God, guide me down your path forever.” The whole point of God knowing us so well, the whole beauty of this truth that God know everything we do and before a thought is on our heart, is not that God is some great score keeper waiting for us to slip up, it is not that we have to demonstrate our goodness or our worth, but rather that God knows us so well that we can be fully who we are, and let God take us to where we might yet be.

As school gets started, I think back to my days at Babson College, when I worked as Associate Dean of Students, helping students to grow. There is one student development theory that has stuck with me to this day. It is what’s being said in this psalm. It says this: that people learn, people grow, people develop the best when there

is the least discrepancy between who they are and who they project themselves to be. In other words, we thrive, we grow the most, we learn the most when we are our true and authentic self. And what this psalm invites us to do is not to hide anything from God. But instead to be our true authentic self in the midst of prayer and in the midst of listening for our still-speaking God, the path might be laid before us, that we might not succumb to the ways of this world, but rather follow in the ways of the footsteps of that tiny little baby who was swaddled.

I want to remind you a little bit of how Luke describes Jesus' life, and what that means for you and me. If you remember, after being baptized, Jesus was driven, the Bible says, immediately into the wilderness, where he was tested and tempted by the things of life – by wealth, by power, by fame, by anything he wanted or needed. Those are the temptations that show up in our lives every day. And yet Jesus, having been swaddled as a baby not just in clothes but in teaching, chose to wrap himself instead in God's Scripture, every single response to the devil not his own, but rather the words he had learned in Sunday school. We remember that when Jesus was in the garden, he was grieved so deeply, Luke says, he was praying so earnestly, that Luke reports great beads of sweat started falling from his forehead, but sweat that was like blood. But we remember that it was in that moment that Jesus didn't look his future in the eye and deal with it himself. Instead he threw himself on God's mercy – not my will but your own, God, for I know that in your hands I am swaddled, I am cared for, you know my path better than I. And then even on the cross, love poured out. Luke reminds us that Jesus cried out not in despair but rather "into your hands," in to your swaddling arms I commend my spirit. For having come to the end, Jesus remembered the truth of this psalm, that he was still with God, in whom there is no end, only new beginnings.

As we begin a new program year, of teaching and learning, of beauty and singing, we start with this psalm, not because it tells us all the answers of where we're going, but instead the answers of how we might get there, being watched over lovingly and caringly by God, sharing the fullness of who we are before the fullness of God's love.

One last point I want to make about this Psalm is if you read the inscription above the psalm, this one says "For the choirmaster." This one says that people like these with gifted voices should be singing these words to us every week. Why? Because it is hard to let ourselves be fully known by anyone, even a loving God. So the psalmist says let the choir sing it to you over and over again until you know the words and the tune so well you sing it out loud, not just in church but in everything that you do; even in the middle of the night when the blankets have come off and you are tossing and turning.

Friends, blessings and peace on this new journey. In it may you find ultimate freedom by welcoming God's loving embrace over and under, around and about. Amen.



*The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor*