

Scent of A Savior

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, December 7, 2008 Isaiah 40:1-11

What does Christmas smell like?

In some ways, it is an odd question. Yet I suspect one or more aromas came quickly to most of our minds. Whether it was the smell of pine from wreaths or trees, or the aroma of cinnamon, nutmeg and ginger wafting from the kitchen, or maybe the scent of a tangerine as you turn up the peel, most of us have a deep association between the Christmas and certain aromas.

And aromas have a special power to evoke strong, emotional memories and associations, because smell, memory and emotion all operate in the same part of the human brain – the limbic system. That is why, besides the sense of touch perhaps, no sense is capable of bringing us as much comfort or immediate happiness as the sense of smell.

And that helps explain why selling aroma (or fragrance) is big business. Not only are perfumes and colognes big sellers, but other scented products are also popular. Believe it or not, there is even a website called “Everything Smells Dot Com.” Their slogan? “You smell it, we sell it.” Their products include air fresheners, scented candles, scratch-and-sniff stickers and even scented products for pets! The aromas they offer include everything from chamomile to cannabis, from hot dog to hyacinth, from pomegranate to peanut butter, 181 in all. Among the more “unusual” scents they sell are something called “Clean,” “Dill Pickle,” “Taco” and “Paint.”

But when it comes to sellers of unusual scents, it is hard to top Bob and Karen Tosterud. Bob and Karen operate a mail order company in South Dakota that sells scented candles that they claim emanates with the fragrance of Christ himself — hence the name, “His Essence.” Bob came up with the idea while reading the Psalms, Psalm 45 specifically. Psalm 45 is a wedding psalm, which refers to the bridegroom as having robes that are “fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia” (45:8). The Tosteruds interpret this passage as a messianic psalm that describes the olfactory essence of Jesus when he returns.

Says Karen, “We wanted people to be able to experience Christ in new ways and to be able to read a Bible and have that scent and that candle as a reminder that he is with us all the time.” To which Bob adds, “You can’t see him and you can’t touch him. This is a situation where you may

be able to sense him by smelling. And it provides a really new dimension to one's experience with Jesus."

Each "His Essence" candle sells for about 18 bucks and the Tosteruds can't seem to keep them on the shelves. They started with a first run production of 768 candles the fall of 2004, but once the word got out, they found they had sold more than 10,000 of the flowery, cinnamon-scented candles in the first year alone, with more going out the door every day online and through some 420 retail outlets around the country. In 2007 they began to offer other scented candles, ones called "Forgiven," "Last Supper," "Adoration," and now "Servanthood." If this all seems rather strange to you, you are not alone. Many critics accuse the Tosteruds of being religious hucksters, even theological snake oil salesmen. And when you stop to think about it, even if the Tosteruds got it right – which is a stretch – of what real use is it to smell what Jesus smelled like? It might satisfy curiosity, but it is hard to see how it could make anyone a better or more faithful follower of Jesus.

If we really want to know the essence of who Jesus was – and is – we don't need to buy an \$18 candle. All we need to do is open up the scriptures, starting with the prophet Isaiah. In the scripture we read this morning, the prophet is speaking to the people of God as they are living through a dark and difficult time. The prophet's message is one of hope – good news to lift their spirits. Isaiah speaks of one to come, one sent by God to bring comfort and to gather the people together: "He will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep." Centuries after Isaiah wrote these words of encouragement, the people of God were again living through dark and difficult times. We may think of Advent as a season of light, but those who waited in the years and months just before Jesus was born would likely have described their times differently. Indeed, they might have borrowed another phrase from the prophet Isaiah to describe themselves – "a people who sat in darkness." Life for ordinary people in ancient times was often difficult. Life expectancy was short and infant mortality was high. There were few effective remedies for chronic and deadly diseases. Droughts destroyed harvests and floods swept away homes, and even if all was well for a while, there was always the threat of some army sweeping through and plundering. It didn't matter much whether that army was technically one's own or not – all armies typically "lived off the land," so to speak, taking what they needed as they passed through territory.

Of course, that was less a worry nearer the time of Jesus' birth. The

great empire of Rome had prevailed far and wide just a few decades back, bringing the famed “Pax Romana” or “Roman Peace” to Palestine. But this “peace” came at a steep price – Rome was not in the business of conquering and occupying foreign territory just for the fun of it. It was, to a large degree, business, and they expected to make a profit. That meant stiff taxes, almost none of which really benefited the people who paid them in any direct or substantial way. Instead, the money supported armies and helped build glorious monuments and palaces far, far away. Meanwhile, in addition to the burden of taxation, the people of Israel were also forced to endure the presence of Roman soldiers in their towns and cities and various ceremonial “patriotic” occasions to remind them of exactly who was in charge – not one of their own, but the great Roman Emperor, Augustus.

So as the people bore the burden and endured the humiliation, they turned to the writings of the prophet Isaiah, and in the words we read, they found encouragement. They needed to believe that God had not forgotten them, that the triumph of pagan foreigners did not mean that they had been abandoned. And Isaiah’s words gave them that reassurance: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” The “essence” of the One for whom the Israelites waited was forgiveness and compassion.

A story recounted by Johann Christian Arnold of the Bruderhoff may help us understand this essence more completely. On Christmas Eve, Brother Angelo, a monk in Francis of Assisi’s order, cleans his simple mountain hut and decorates it for Mass. He says his prayers, sweeps the hearth, hangs a kettle over the fire, and then sits back to wait for Brother Francis, whom he expects later in the day. Just then three outlaws appear at the door, begging for food. Frightened and angry, Brother Angelo sends them away empty-handed, scolding and warning them that thieves are damned to hell fire.

When Francis arrives, he senses that something is not right. Brother Angelo then tells him about his visitors, and Francis sends him up into the mountains with a jug of wine and a loaf, to find them and ask their forgiveness. Brother Angelo is indignant. Unlike Francis, he cannot see the wild men as brothers -- only as outlaws. He sets out obediently, however, and by nightfall (having followed the men’s footsteps in the snow), he finds them and makes amends. Some time later, the legend goes, they leave their cave and join the order.

This story has traditionally been used to encourage Christians to identify with Brother Angelo and remember always to forgive. But it serves us just as well if we identify instead with the outlaws, for that we certainly are. The word the Bible uses is “sinners,” and as sinners, we are owed nothing by God. Indeed we are in debt to God, so deeply in debt we have no hope of being able to pay. Still, there is so much we need. We can only beg. We can only throw ourselves on God’s mercy. And the good news we hear from the prophet is that God is merciful – the debt is paid, our sins are forgiven and we are no longer outlaws or outsiders. We are God’s people, lambs he takes up in his arms, and persons he calls to “join the order” and carry on the good work begun by our Lord Jesus Christ.

The essence of the messiah who came and is coming again is forgiveness. I have no idea what forgiveness smells like. I guess I could buy the Tosterud’s “Forgiveness” candle. But I don’t think I need to, because I know what forgiveness feels like. It feels like a mother’s embrace. It feels like finding out your mortgage has been paid off. It feels like the celebration when a war ends. It feels like the waters of baptism dripping on your shoulders. It feels like bread in your mouth and wine on your tongue. It feels like worship in the company of others who believe and seek to follow Jesus.

Amen.