

**A Sense of Christmas:  
An Aroma of Peace  
Luke 1:68-79  
Malachi 3:1-4**

The house is decorated. At least it appears that way. The tree is up, the ornaments and the lights adorn it. There is a Christmassy quilt hanging on the wall; the Christmas mugs are in the cupboard.

Yes, it is Christmas time at the Flowers house. And yet...Anita is not finished. There is something that isn't quite right.

You see, we are one of those families that doesn't have real tree. It is an ecological-recyclable-economic-lazy-cheap-tradition kind of thing. We have always had an artificial tree. It is gorgeous, and it gives us family time each year as we play Christmas-tree-god, putting the tree together. But there is something missing.

The smell.

As beautiful as our tree is, it doesn't smell. There isn't that evergreen smell wafting through our house. So as we left after our Advent Workshop she gathered up s many cuttings that our car still smells like a Christmas Tree farm!

There is something about the smell of this season. When you came into church this morning you may have noticed that it does smell a bit different! In fact, there are all sorts of smells competing for our attention. There is the smell of our Advent candles made from beeswax. Then there is another one, that might not be familiar to you, but it is a Christmas aroma. It is frankincense—one of gifts that the Wise Men brought to Jesus.

A strange gift to bring to a child. Incense?

Yet, frankincense was a very valuable commodity in the ancient world. It was produced in Persia and is mentioned as one of the major ingredients of the incense taken into the Holy of Holies. In fact, the use of this incense for any other purpose was forbidden by Jewish law. The thought was that this incense would be pleasing to God.

It was a smell that any Jew would associate with worship in the temple. It was the smell that Zechariah had been smelling just before he saw the angel telling him that his wife would have a child who would be the forerunner of the Messiah. It was that smell that was in his nose when his mouth was shut by the angel, unable to speak until John was born. For the rest of his life I think Zechariah would be silenced just by the smell of frankincense.

Smell is important. Oh, we don't think of it very often. It isn't one of the first ones that comes to mind when you play that game "If you had to lose one of your senses which one would you choose?" Quickly we go to sight, or hearing. Smell—it is rarely even on the list.

And yet, from an evolutionary perspective smell is one of the most important senses. Researchers tell us that we can identify over 10,00 different smells. You might want to try making a list this afternoon! Over 10,000 different smells! Why such diversity?

Well our sense of smell is one that allows us to detect danger in our environment. We are constantly testing the quality of the air we breathe. Is there smoke present, some toxic smell, anything that might alert us to potential trouble.

I remember waking up one morning, the day after Christmas with the unmistakable smell of smoke. My sister was with us, and I woke up mad, because I had told her that she wasn't allowed to smoke in our house. I went downstairs, ready to fuss at her only to find her very much asleep. But the smell was still there. I wandered around, looking for any sign of trouble—finding nothing when suddenly the smoke detector went off in the house. It turned out that there was a problem with our furnace, that would have been disastrous!

Smell warns us of danger, but it also it serves a recognition function. We all have our own unique smell (some more pleasant than others! - but that's another story!) and can recognize and be recognized by our smell. Dogs can distinguish between the smell of T-shirts worn by non-identical twins (they couldn't tell the difference between identical twins - presumably because they smell identical!). Children can distinguish between the smell of their siblings and other children of the same age. Babies recognise their own mothers' smell and mothers recognize their own babies' smell.

There is something about our smell that makes us feel at home. Have you ever had the experience of visiting someone else's home? No matter how comfortable the bed might be, it just doesn't smell right. Coming home is a wonderful experience because it smells right.

Smell alerts us danger, it helps with recognition, and perhaps more than any other sense it can pull up memories from long long ago. The smell of a freshly cut grass in the summer will instantaneously take me back to a Saturday afternoon growing up in Cherryville. I am standing on the patio as my father is just finishing mowing the grass, the sun is setting over my uncle's farm and I am wearing new white tennis shoes. The smell takes me back there as if it were today!

Marcel Proust, the French novelist reminded us of that phenomenon when he wrote: *"When nothing else subsists from the past, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered· the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls· bearing resiliently, on tiny and almost impalpable drops of their essence, the immense edifice of memory"*<sup>1</sup>

Smell can lead us to the past, but it can also urge us to some future occasion. The other day I went home at lunch, and when I opened the door I could smell soup cooking on the stove. It wasn't done yet, but the smell lingered with me all afternoon, reminding me of something to come. The smell wasn't the thing—it was just a foretaste of something to come.

This week someone commented on the sermon title—"You can't smell peace." And she was right. Peace isn't really something that we can smell. War—most definitely! Who can ever forget that memorable scene in Francis Ford Coppola's masterpiece, *Apocalypse Now* when Robert Duval is standing on that beach, bombs exploding, chaos all around and

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<sup>1</sup> Marcel Proust "The Remembrance of Things Past" <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/540511-when-nothing-else-subsists-from-the-past-after-the-people>

he utters those words, *"Do you smell that? It's napalm, son. Nothing else on the world smells like that. I love the smell of napalm in the morning. Smells like..... Victory."*

But then he looks at the scene around him, he smells the napalm in the air and says, *"Some day this war's gonna end."*<sup>2</sup>

It was the smell that took him back, and took him forward. It was the smell that reminded him of the hell he was in, and of his prayer that maybe he would someday find an escape.

If you read the papers today there are times in which it seems like all we can smell is napalm and gunfire—drowning refugees in the English Channel, flood waters in British Columbia, unmarked graves, homeless individuals, gunfire in places far and all too near. We can get so accustomed to the smell, to the news that it feels as if that is all there is. We are tempted to just accept it.

But then there comes a scent of something different, that gives us an opportunity to bring a bit of peace in a way that is unexpected.

The smudging of a gathering for the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation; Khyaria's homemade baklava, the aroma of frankincense. And suddenly we imagine something different!

We get used to the same smells—the smell of our house, the smell of children. That smell reminds of how life is. Sometimes the scent is more like napalm—a scent of conflict, of fighting, of warfare. And at times we can be lulled into thinking that is how life is supposed to be, that it is the way it always will be.

But then there is another scent maybe the smell of hay in a manger, of a Christmas tree...and we remember...and hope. There is a scent that maybe, just maybe all wars will come to an end—the war between nations, the war between factions, the war in families, the war in ourselves.

Somewhere deep in our memory is the smell of that peace. Somewhere deep in our dream is the smell of that kind of future. It isn't here, not yet. It is the promise of something to come.

At Christmas. Immanuel—God with us.

May it be so.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPXVGQnJm0w>