

The taste of hope. The touch of peace. The sound of joy. The smell of love. The senses are so much a part of our lives. So many things come to us through our various senses.

Memories are triggered from the sense of smell, and it seems like we can instantly be transported to a particular moment in time with just a whiff. This might be even more true at Christmastime, particularly with the distinguishable scents of homemade feasts, pies, baked goods, and other items that have become treasured traditions. Fresh bread, apple cider, a fresh pot of coffee. Imagine what love smells like.

But it is just as true that certain smells can bring us back to a place of pain or sadness. It might be a certain aftershave that reminds us of a father we miss dearly. Or a particular aroma brings to mind a dark experience that we have tried to block from our memory.

When we try to imagine what love smells like, we will probably quickly think of that which is positive, bright, pleasant. After all, love is something that is positive, bright, and pleasant, right?!

But have you ever wondered what the smells were like at the time and place of the birth of Jesus? We have our experiences and ideas of sanitized birthing rooms and clean hospitals with all the smells associated with those clean hospitals. But what about the birthing room of Jesus?

There would have been the smell of hay and whatever else was on the floor of the room where Jesus was born. Or maybe the smell of the wood which the manger was made from. There may have been the smell of different animals that shared that living space and normally ate from that manger.

It probably didn't look quite as neat as the typical polished nativity scenes that we see on Christmas cards or in our homes. It was a messy, smelly place. (see cartoon) Not that barns are messy and smelly. I grew up on a dairy farm and we did our best to keep the barn neat. I never minded the smell. But it's still a barn, and it smells like it.

For Better or For Worse®

by Lynn Johnston



God allowed Jesus to be born into a mess because it shows his willingness to enter our mess. Life affected by sin is a mess. Our lives are not neat and tidy, with everything in perfect order. We say things that hurt others. We make decisions that hurt ourselves. We do things that have long-term consequences, but we don't think that far ahead. And then we pay the price later and wonder why we did it. If we are honest with ourselves, we recognize that our life looks way more like the first-century messy manger scene than like the nativity scene on a card or in our home. We're messed up. We're sinful. The sights, smells, and sounds of our life leave much to be desired. We stink. Sometimes we might just say, life stinks.

The birth of Jesus puts him at the centre of a mess, not a masterpiece. Jesus came to the manger because humanity needed to be rescued. Not rescued from a sanitized petting zoo, but from a filthy, dirty stable. It was a mess, just like us! Imagine what love smells like.

The manger teaches us that Jesus is fine with the mess. He's used to the smell. And he loves us enough to enter the smelly mess right smack in the middle. If you struggle to understand how a perfect God can love an imperfect person, stop looking at some sanitized nativity scene and imagine the smells of the stable. Jesus didn't mind the mess of the manger, and he doesn't mind our mess, either. Imagine what love smells like.

Christmas means many things, but, at its heart, lies this truth of the incarnation. God takes on human flesh, a human body; he becomes a person like us. At Christmas, "the word was made flesh." Imagine what love smells like.

Now, what does all that have to do with some random reading from an obscure prophet like Ezekiel? Because in those verses God talks about his people as sheep. He is going to send a good shepherd to take care of his sheep.

A typical shepherd does not watch the sheep only from the 14<sup>th</sup> floor of an office building, checking the closed-circuit cameras positioned throughout the barn and fields. A typical shepherd does not care for his sheep by pushing buttons from the comfort of his office to send the feed. Nor does he send remote lasers from hovering drones to discourage the threats of roaming coyotes.

Typical shepherds are those who live among the sheep; serve the sheep; feed, water, and protect the sheep; touch and talk to the sheep – even lay down their lives for the sheep. When they hang around the sheep that much and that closely, shepherds smell like sheep.

Jesus smelled like sheep. He became like us. This is the heart of Christmas. This is the truth of the incarnation. God takes on human flesh. He came to find us, to save us from the destructive power of sin. He came to give us the taste of hope in the face of death. He

came to give us the touch of peace in a troubled world. He came to bring the sounds of joy in a world of sadness. To do that, he became like us in every way, except sin. Imagine what love smells like.

The good shepherd, described in Ezekiel, finds, rescues, saves his sheep from harm. The good shepherd protects and blesses his sheep. Verse 31 states that “you my sheep are my people.” Jesus has come to be our Good Shepherd; we are his sheep, his people.

As we trust him, as we follow the Shepherd and walk with him and talk with him, he wants us to become like him. Disciples become like their Master. As we become like him, we also acquire the aroma of Jesus, to smell like him.

It’s what Paul talks about in 2 Corinthians 2:14-15. God calls us and leads us in victory and “uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ.”

What does love smell like? For one thing, it smells like sheep. It smells like the people around us. Jesus wants us to love the people he loved. He wants us to bring his aroma through our service to others. This includes witnessing for him by word, witnessing for him by character, speaking for him and living like him, showing in our life that he rules us, and professing by our words that he does.

An example of this is the Love Stinks initiative that was developed by Greg Houldcroft, director of CrossTown Impact, for the youth of our community. The idea is to wear a t-shirt for 5 days, making a difference by connecting real love and real action to the stinky issues around us. Funds are raised, and there is a daily devotional that raises awareness of stinky issues and our response of justice and love.



Following the Good Shepherd, love smells like the effort to find lost sheep and welcome them home. To do that, we hang around them, sharing the aroma of the love of Jesus with them.

The smell of love is humble, selfless giving. This is the heart of Christmas, the truth of the incarnation. God takes on human flesh. Jesus humbles himself, leaving the glory of heaven, to become like us. God enters our world.

We live this smell of love by sharing and living the aroma of the love of Jesus. This is expressed in humble, selfless giving of our time and abilities and our money.

Look at the stable, at the cross, at the sheep; look to Jesus. Imagine what love smells like.

Amen.