

2 Advent B

On the Scent of Jesus

Estée Lauder once visited a posh Parisian department store to convince them to carry her newest fragrance. She was promptly rebuffed. Characteristically unwilling to take “no” for an answer, Lauder poured perfume all over the floor. So many customers asked about the scent that the store agreed to stock the product.

What comes to mind on this Sunday of Advent is how the aroma of candles, fir trees and Christmas cookies that wafts over us this time of year can distract us from the real essence of the coming Savior. If we’re really wanting to experience the Christ in our midst, what should we be sniffing around for?

Bob and Karen Tosterud have the perfect solution: a candle that not only reminds you of Jesus, but actually smells like Jesus.

While other candles offer the aromas of fruit or spices, the Tosteruds have invented a candle that, when lit, emanates with the fragrance of Christ himself — hence the name, “His Essence.”

Visit the Holy Land and you can walk where Jesus walked; buy this candle and you can smell like Jesus smelled.

“We see it as a ministry,” says Bob, who along with Karen came up with the idea when they read a passage from Psalm 45, 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.

Wondering what a combination of myrrh, aloe and cassia would smell like, the South Dakota couple combined these oil scents and, with the help of a friend who is a candlemaker, began to produce “His Essence” candles as a business and ministry venture.

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, with more going out the door every day online and through some 420 retail outlets around the country.

Customers and critics of the candles abound, with some saying that it enhances their devotional lives and others seeing it as a gimmick that is way more about cents than scents. Some biblical scholars reading this will, no doubt, wax skeptical about what kind of exegetical aromatherapy the proprietors were engaging in when they came up with this interpretation of the psalm.

For them, is really the whole point of the exercise. You have to respect that.

Yet, Isaiah gives us another sense of what we might smell as Christ comes into our hearts again this Advent Sunday. The Messiah's real essence is a smell that is more "earthy."

In Isaiah 40 we are given the scents, the sights and sounds of what Jesus brings with him to change the world.

The first of these is a "highway for our God." The "highway for our God" is the smell of earth being turned over as rough places are made plain, and mountains of uneven land are made level. God's highway is one where the potholes are filled. It is a highway where the shifting sands of life are no match, where no desert can keep His road from entering.

In other words, the scent of the Messiah's coming will be less associated with Wicks and Sticks than with Home Depot. **The smell of freshly turned earth is the smell of change** — an altering of the spiritual landscape, a smoothing out of the rough edges of human sin. In the prophet's mind there's some hard work to be done in preparation for his coming — no time to stop and smell the flowers! God's glory is yet to be revealed and only those willing to work will see it.

Next, the prophet Isaiah turns his attention to the temporal nature of humanity, which is like “grass.” He compares human nature to grass and flowers that wither and fade. The image that leaps to the mind is a field of hay that is green in the Spring but dries up in the Summer and is cut down and rolled up for feed and other uses. Strong winds and heat cause this to happen. **The smell of freshly mown hay** reminds us that God’s program of grace and mercy will enable our labors to outlast us.

That which will last forever is the word of God. **Like the smell of an old leather Bible**, worn with use, its words have inspired and led to expiration on the fields of harvest. God’s word will endure and remain despite the fragility of human life. Robyn went into the Family Christian Bookstore this week and she noted all kinds and shapes of bibles. So many different Bibles tells us that the word of God still is the best seller of all time and it speaks to more languages than any other volume ever written. In the beginning was the Word. God spoke through the prophets and Jesus is His word and the smell of that word is like old leather.

Then there is the **smell of human sweat**. Isaiah introduces God to the cities of Judah and describes him as one who is mighty, his sleeves are rolled up and the biceps of his arms are bulging. The work of saving humanity involves God's blood, sweat and tears and they will be poured out on the cross of Jesus Christ. It's important for us to remember that saving us cost God something and that following Christ will cost us some of our own sweat as we begin to work for what we pray for: the kingdom of God.

The final scent presented to us by Isaiah is the image of sheep cared for by God as a shepherd. In biblical times there was no job dirtier than being a shepherd, spending your days tramping after **smelly sheep**. Yet, over and over again, we read this image in the Bible. Isaiah reminds his hearers that the role of the Messiah will be like that of a shepherd, who "will feed his sheep like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom; and gently lead the mother sheep." (40:10-11).

Jesus is the "Good Shepherd" because he is willing to get down and dirty in the mess of sinful humanity and lead us to safety and security. **The scent of the Savior is the scent of manure.**

Consider the fact that he began his life in a barn, and it's easy to understand how he identifies with us as a gentle shepherd who seeks to guide wayward humanity.

Now these scents given to us by Isaiah are not the sweet smelling Savior we find on the market shelf. "His Essence" may remind you of a Jesus ready to be wedded to his people. That sweet scent may be what we smell at his second coming. But the business of saving people is a dirty, smelly business. We are given reminders today of the cost to God for our redeeming: dirt, sweat, dairy air, dead grass and a dusty, old leather Bible. And we are reminded that if we are willing to smell this presence and pour it all over ourselves as perfume we will enjoy his essence and that happens when we're employed in his mission of making disciples. AMEN.