

The True Smells of Christmas

The birth of Jesus was not about pine needles, eggnog, apple cider or cinnamon candles.

I associate Christmas with sensory overload: Colored lights twinkle, sleigh bells jingle and snow makes cheeks rosy, except here in Florida where we generate that frosty winter feeling with air conditioners. Then there are the holiday smells: Pine needles, cinnamon candles, spiced apple cider, eggnog, roast turkey and that musty smell of boxed ornaments that come out of the attic only once a year. Plus my favorite: White Christmas coffee, a strong brew with a tinge of coconut.

We love these yuletide pleasures, but they have little to do with the original Nativity. The only brilliant light on the eve of Jesus' birth was the mysterious star that beckoned the Magi. Nobody decorated the manger with boughs of holly. Mary didn't serve cider or fig pudding to the shepherds, and there were no turkeys in Israel to provide a holiday feast.

But there were certain smells associated with that original Christmas. It would be a good idea for us to remember them as we celebrate with our families and friends this year.

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First, there was the earthy smell of a barn. We don't know what Jesus' birthplace looked like, but we imagine it was an open stable or cave full of animals. Some scholars believe it was a simple room inside a house where animals were allowed to stay with humans during the night. Since we know Jesus' first cradle was a manger—a crude feeding trough—then we can assume it had the faint odor of hay, wool, goat hair and cow manure.

What does that tell us about this Savior? What a marvel it is that the majestic Son of God would not only condescend to our level but also stoop so low as to spend His first hours among livestock! How wondrous that a king would enter this world in such a humble fashion. The creatures that stood around the rustic, wooden bed gave witness that He became poor to make us rich.

Second, the wise men brought fragrant gifts of frankincense and myrrh. These aromatic gum resins were used in the tabernacle to make the anointing oil (see Ex. 30:22-25) and the incense for the holy place (see). Frankincense also was burned with meat sacrifices. Anyone who came near the tabernacle of Moses or who was fortunate enough to minister inside could smell these perfumes.

Did these wise men from the east know that the tabernacle was made of gold and was filled with the smell of frankincense and myrrh? Probably not, yet by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit they brought these prophetic gifts to herald the news that God had “become flesh” to “tabernacle among us” (the implied Greek translation of John 1:14).

Myrrh was certainly an odd gift for a baby. An aromatic substance derived from the resin of a shrub, it was typically used at funerals to prepare a corpse. In fact, after Jesus was crucified, Nicodemus used a large quantity of it to prepare Jesus’ body for burial (see John 19:39). Perhaps these mysterious Magi had some limited understanding that one day this baby would die for the sins of the world.

Both myrrh and frankincense come from the desert. The boswellia tree that gives us frankincense grows only in the arid Arabian peninsula and in Somalia. Yet these trees provide one of the most prized perfumes in the world. That should tell us that if we want the true fragrance of the resurrected Christ in our lives, we must pass through the wilderness just as He did.

The comfortable modern church smugly preaches that we don't need to die to ourselves. We seek blessings and prosperity while avoiding trials, tribulations and spiritual warfare. We have settled for a cheap perfume of self-indulgence. Real Christianity smells like Jesus because His followers stay on His altar as living sacrifices.

Third, the smell of blood, sweat and tears permeated the first Christmas. Unlike the images we see on greeting cards today, the first coming of Jesus was not cute, sweet or picturesque. The Nativity was actually quite terrifying—from Joseph and Mary's difficult trek out of Nazareth to Jesus' traumatic birth in an unwelcoming city to His hasty journey to Egypt. Then when Herod visited Bethlehem he left the scent of innocent blood in the air.

We can't ignore the fact that the birth of the Savior was a dangerous act. God sent His Son to a violent world that rejected Him. Even though He came as an infant in a manger, hell's armies opposed Him—and Satan unleashed a war against the saints that has left millions martyred. What comforts us is that God does not forget our toil or our suffering. He keeps every drop of blood and every tear, and He will reward His faithful followers when His Son returns in final triumph.

This Christmas, I pray you will breathe in deeply the true meaning of Jesus' birth. You cannot buy these scents I have described, but they will become real to you as you spend time in His presence.

J. Lee Grady is editor of *Charisma*. He wishes you and your family a very Merry Christmas and a blessed New Year.