

Experiencing God Through the Senses: Smell
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Song of Solomon 4:10-15

Chris Brunelle spends a good deal of time looking for hymns
that fit our text or theme for worship.
Whether it's an old favorite or a new hymn or just new to us,
he often finds songs that fit perfectly.
But last week he sent me two hymns as jokes,
saying he was pretty sure I would not want to use either of these
for our series on the senses.

One called "Soldiers, True and Faithful" goes like this:

*1 Soldiers, true and faithful,
Hear the trumpets call;
'Neath your Captain's banner,
Range ye one and all.
Not against the Devil,
Not against the world,
Must the red-cross banner
Only be unfurled.*

*2 Subtle foes are lurking
Deep your hearts within,
There first wage the battle
With the power of sin.
O'er the sight and hearing,
Touch, and taste, and smell,
Let a watch, good Christians,
Guard those portals well.*

*3 Satan, through the senses,
Seeks your souls to slay,
Let no secret traitor,
Jesus' cause betray.
If to lusts enticing*

*Ye betray your heart,
Can ye bid the Devil,
And the world depart?*

*4 By the signs upon you,
By Christ's life within,
Close in deadly conflict
With each pleasant sin.
Jesus' eye is on you,
Keep your solemn vow;
Then a crown immortal
Shall adorn your brow.*

Those lovely lyrics were written by Esther Wigglesworth who was born in 1827.

Then there's this one by an author who was born in 1725.
It begins with this amazing stanza:

*1 Sight, hearing, feeling, taste and smell,
Are gifts we highly prize;
But these may downward lead to hell,
While faith to heaven doth rise.*

But then, oddly enough, he goes on to offer a stanza for each sense,
from a spiritual perspective, applying the senses to faith.

*2 More piercing than the eagle's sight,
Faith views the world unknown:
Surveys the glorious realms of light,
And Jesus on the throne.*

*3 It hears the mighty voice of God,
And ponders what he saith;
His word and works, his gifts and rod,
Have each a voice to faith.*

*4 It feels the touch of heavenly power,
And from the boundless source,*

*Derives fresh vigor every hour
To run its daily course.*

*5 The truth and goodness of the LORD
Are suited to its tasks;
Mean is the worldling's pampered board,
To faith's perpetual feast.*

*6 Till saving faith possess the mind,
In vain of sense we boast;
We are but senseless, tasteless, blind,
And deaf, and dead, and lost.*

So . . . our senses are going to lead us straight to hell,
unless we use them metaphorically and not physically.
This was written by the same prolific writer who brought us the words,
“I once was lost, but now am found,
was blind but now I see.”
Yes, this was written by John Newton, who also wrote Amazing Grace.

So let's take a moment to compare these hymns of the 18th and 19th centuries
that so demean and belittle the senses
to the passage of scripture that Lisa read for us from Song of Solomon.
I asked her to read from a paraphrase called The Message
because it really brings out the senses, particularly the sense of smell.

Listen again to this excerpt from what she read:

*Your clothes smell like the wild outdoors,
the fresh scent of high mountains.
Dear lover and friend, you're a secret garden,
a private and pure fountain.
Body and soul, you are paradise,
a whole orchard of succulent fruits—
Ripe apricots and peaches,
oranges and pears;
Nut trees and cinnamon,
and all scented woods;
Mint and lavender,*

and all herbs aromatic.

This book of the Bible, referred to as either Song of Solomon or Song of Songs, is “a celebration of erotic love.”

Scholar Wil Gafney writes,

“Not surprisingly its literal reading was quickly abandoned in favor of allegorical readings in much of Judaism and Christianity where it has been read as symbolizing the love of God or Christ for Israel or the Church.

[This in spite of the fact that the name of God does not appear anywhere in the entire book.]

A literal reading requires coming to terms with the raw sexual desire and gratification called for by this woman to her man which many readers found — and find — incompatible with their notion of scripture in spite of the fact that these verses are enshrined and canonized in scripture.”¹

She goes on to say,

“The Greek philosophical tradition that will become so important to the Church Fathers as many of them reject and restrict sensuality, sexual love and bodiliness is unknown here.

This text does not share the later dualism separating flesh and spirit inspired by Greek philosophy in which the body and its desires are regarded as being lower or lesser than spiritual things.

Body and soul are one here, united in love.”²

Although the flesh and spirit dualism was popular in Jesus’ day, the Greek word translated as flesh typically refers to the sinful state of human beings, not just the physical state.

Unfortunately, and to the great detriment of many, large swathes of Christianity have held to the flesh and spirit dualism suggesting that all bodily desires are tools of the devil.

“*The Imitation of Christ*, attributed to Thomas a Kempis, was first published in Latin over 500 years ago and remains in print today.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-22-2/commentary-on-song-of-solomon-28-13>

² Ibid.

It has been translated into dozens of languages
and has a reputation as being second only to the Bible
as a guide and inspiration to Christian believers.

In a modern translation, we read:

‘Sometimes you must use violence and resist your sensual appetite bravely.
You must pay no attention to what the flesh does or does not desire,
taking pains that it be subjected, even by force, to the spirit.
And it should be chastised and forced to remain in subjection
until it is prepared for anything and is taught to be satisfied with little.’³

Author Jan Phillips, in a book called *Divining the Body*, writes that

“The greatest tragedy of Western religion is that it elevates
disembodied love over embodied love,
leading us to believe that it is better to be out of our bodies than in them....

Cultural anthropologists tell us that there was a time
when humankind honored its oneness with the natural world
and lived in peaceful, full-bodied harmony with nature.

But as broader social organization developed,
as religion became codified in language and in hierarchy,
and as the intellectual became dominant over the physical,
we began to separate our souls from our bodies.

We forgot we were sparks from the same flame, waves of the same sea,
that as much as the Divine is around us, the Divine is within us,
experiencing itself through every sense in our bodies.”⁴

So our series, which seems so simple, is actually a bit provocative,
for we are daring to proclaim our embodiment,
daring to proclaim even that we experience God through our bodies,
through our senses.

The ancients knew it.

The Hebrew scriptures are full of passages about scents, aromas, fragrances.

In Exodus God gives instructions on sacrifices that include aroma offerings.

“On sixteen different occasions in the book of Leviticus, an ‘aroma’ is mentioned
as something pleasing to the Lord.

³ Phillips, Jan. *Divining the Body: Reclaim the Holiness of Your Physical Self*. Page ix.

⁴ Phillips

Specifically, the aroma of a sacrifice is important to God.”⁵
 Then, when God discovers that the people are making physical sacrifices
 without spiritual ones—
 when they make all the right offerings rather than feeding the hungry
 and caring for the widows and orphans—
 God is quoted as saying that he does not desire such sacrifices.

The scent of kindness, the aroma of justice, was far more pleasing to God.
 And of course there’s all that talk about scent and perfume
 in the Song of Solomon,
 and in the psalms we read,
 “I call upon you, O Lord; come quickly to me;
 give ear to my voice when I call to you.
 Let my prayer be counted as incense before you,
 and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.”

In the New or Second Testament we have fewer discussions about scents,
 but they are there.

The Magi brought frankincense and myrrh.
 A woman poured expensive nard or perfume on Jesus’ feet.
 The women brought burial spices for Jesus’ body on Easter morning.

I am sensitive to scents, and I usually flee any store I step into that burns incense.

So I’m glad we aren’t a “smells and bells” kind of church.
 At the same time, I kind of wish we were.
 I wish there was a smell that gathered us for worship,
 the same way there’s a smell that gathers us around a campfire.
 I wish there was a scent that reminded us of time with God,
 the way grandma’s scent of roses and apple pie welcomed us in.
 I wish there was an aroma that said “God is here!”
 the way Axe body spray announces the arrival of the junior varsity
 basketball team!

I wish there was a scent to church.
 And today there is because Bobbie Peterson and I
 started bread machines early this morning
 so that we would smell bread baking
 as we came in to worship.

⁵ <https://www.gotquestions.org/aroma-sacrifice.html>

There is a scent to church even beyond candles and grape juice and bread.
 It just depends on how you define church and how you define worship.
 You can worship in a cabin surrounded by the scent of pine,
 in your garden surrounded by lilac and roses,
 in your partner's arms surrounded by the scents of
 Speed Stick and Crest.

In the Harry Potter series, there is a potion called Amortentia.
 Its effects are described like this:

"A gold-coloured cauldron was emitting one of the most seductive scents Harry had ever inhaled: Somehow it reminded him simultaneously of treacle tart, the woody smell of a broomstick handle, and something flowery he thought he might have smelled at the Burrow. He found that he was breathing very slowly and deeply and that the potion's fumes seemed to be filling him up like drink."

He later identified that smell from the Burrow
 as the smell of the woman he would one day marry.

To Harry's friend Hermione, Amortentia smelled like
 fresh-cut grass, new parchment, and her love interest's hair.
 Amortentia is said to be the most powerful love potion in the world
 because it smells different to each person.
 To each person it smells like what they find most attractive.

I wonder if God's love is somehow similar,
 so that it reaches us where we are, wherever we are,
 in whatever form we need at the time.
 Maybe faith smells like incense and maybe faith smells like bread
 and maybe faith smells like wood and juice and old books,
 different to each of us and yet the same, uniting us.

If we ever doubt the ability of our senses, our bodies, as ways to experience God,
 remember the incarnation.

The humanity in which Jesus of Nazareth was clothed
 "was not just miserable unredeemed flesh,"⁶
 but also joyful, loving, touching, smelling, sensing flesh.

Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

Let us sing together the hymn printed on the insert in your bulletin.

⁶ Gafney