

Luke 2:1-7

The Smells of Christmas

Coming to know God through Jesus in the flesh

Christmas has got to be one of the best times of the year for wonderful smells. Particularly in Canada it usually comes with a good dusting, or major downfall, of snow. The smells of summer with the freshness of flora and fauna have long since passed. Christmas brings the smell of, or at least the memory of, fresh cut evergreen trees, Christmas baking, and Christmas dinner. As much as these smells are almost ingrained into our idea of Christmas, they are a far cry from the smells of that first Christmas in Bethlehem.

Now to imagine that first Christmas, to place yourself in that situation can be near impossible. Contrary to our Christmas folklore, in Luke, we are not told that Mary and Joseph were in a stable, only that Mary laid her baby in a manger, a feeding trough for animals. So we understand that where this couple found themselves that night was in the lowliest of places. This was a humble birth. Being that there was a feeding trough we assume that this place had at least some warmth for the animals that may have been sheltered there, giving some protection from the elements. The donkey Mary and Joseph had used for the trip would likely have stood close by them in that place. Thus, it is easily conjectured that it was a stable.

With no details given on the place other than the manger, one must also imagine the other pieces of the picture. There would have been hay or straw, something to bed down the animals and also to feed them. But I have yet to see a place that houses animals that didn't also have the aroma of manure. Animals don't go and find a discreet place to do their business, they do it where they are. For those who never grew up on or visited a farm, this is likely the most difficult part of the scene to imagine. One cannot imagine smells they have not experienced.

Yet these are not the only smells that one would have experienced in this moment with Mary and Joseph. There was the smell of the animals, but also the people. This wasn't a "shower everyday" time in history. And in this case Mary and Joseph were at the end of long days on the road as they traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem. And though not everyone has experienced child birth, in fact many men here would not necessarily have been given the opportunity to be in the delivery room when their children were born, trust me when I say this is messy business. Childbirth is work. There is blood, sweat, and tears.

We like to sanitize Mary at the manger. In pictures Mary's clothing is always a beautiful blue, she has a halo over her head, as she lovingly kneels at the side of her child in the

manager - but really?! Jesus may have been the Son of God, but he came into the world the same way that you and I entered it – as a baby. And this point is not to be missed.

This child came through the birthing channel, with all the bodily fluids that accompany childbirth. Mary's clothing would have been stained and dripping. It is not like she had a hospital gown to change into. This place of Jesus' birth was the lowliest of places. The stable was a place of humility.

Hard to keep your dignity in tack in these circumstances. But that was and has always been the message of Jesus birth. He came not as a prince in a palace, not as the son of a warrior or soldier, but the son of peasants and as such Jesus' birth gave him the vantage point to understand the plight of the most vulnerable of the world.

With all that is smelly, there is also a wonderful smell in that place. The smell of a new born baby. Babies are delightful. They are approachable. Though not all people want to hold babies, it tends to be that when people anticipate the moment when a child is born in their circle, they also anticipate that they will get to hold the child. And this child was one that shepherds and wise men came to see, the poor and powerless, and the wise and influential. What makes this approachable perspective truly amazing is that this baby was God in the flesh. Approaching God this way was radically different than anything anyone ever thought would happen.

Prior to this moment there were always rules and regulations about how one might approach God. One aspect of this was that the Levites, the priestly tribe of Israel, had a responsibility to make sure they stayed ritually clean and pure so that they could attend to their duties in the synagogue. Approaching God was a formidable encounter to be done only by those most prepared for the task.

Then Jesus comes into the picture. I don't believe that we can fully grasp the incredible juxtaposition of this night. This was not how the Jewish people believed any of this would happen. It would be like us finding the child born in a homeless shelter. They were looking for someone of high birth to follow in the name and footsteps of their most revered King David. Still Jesus' birth did fulfill the words of the prophets. It just wasn't what people imagined so it was near impossible to believe. But to those who were a part of this story, it was believable, incredible, and true. This babe in a manger was God. God made humble and beautiful in the birth of this child. God made approachable, touchable, accessible to everyone.

This birth of God, was the birth of a real baby who took on our flesh and became like us in every way, except for sin. This baby was like every other baby born, and though he would have smelled fresh and beautiful, with soft cuddly skin, there were diapers to be changed. But it is that smell of the diaper that reminds us of Jesus humanity more than anything else. This baby who would have had to have a dirty diaper removed and a clean one put on him, would one day be stripped of all undergarments, hung on a cross, exposed for all the world to see.

The love that is so easily seen and expressed in the manger scene ends in a scene of divine love so deep and encompassing, that it too becomes more than we can imagine. The stories of Jesus in the Gospels tell of the babe wrapped in bands of cloth, laid in a manger, who grew to be the one on which world history has been written. He never lifted a hand to harm anyone, he was never a king, a warrior, or even a prince as the world expected that a Son of God would come, and then he died the most indignant death known to people of the time. The Cross. The symbol that at the time only meant death, has come to mean life for us.

This is an extraordinary story of love – of God's love. It breaks all preconceived notions of a powerful untouchable God who just wants obedient people. This is the story of God, the God of love. The God who desires to be in relationship with the people that were created out of love and so came in a way that most easily expresses love. The birth of a powerless child. Jesus came so that God might know our living in a way that was not possible before this moment. That same Jesus who was with God from the beginning, lived the life of a human being, and now lives and reigns once again with God. That Jesus knows us. You and I can trust God's love for us even when it seems that all is against us. God is with you. God is Emmanuel, God with us, the babe, the man, the Savior. Amen.