

A Very Smelly Christmas December 24, 2022

At the end of the 20th century, *Time Magazine* published a list of the 100 worst ideas of the 1900s. Making the list were items like leisure suits, asbestos, George Lazenby playing James Bond, eight-track tapes, and Cheese Whiz (which is just absurd).

Melissa August, Harriet Barovick, Michelle Derrow, Tam Gray, Daniel S. Levy, Lina Lofaro, David Spitz, Joel Stein and Chris Taylor. "The 100 Worst Ideas of the Century." *Time Magazine*. June 14, 1999. <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,991230,00.html>

But one of the blunders that I found most amusing was something called "Smell-o-Vision." The idea, which has been tried a few times over the course of the century, was that audiences come to a theater to watch a movie. At specific points in the movie, special dispensers released odors that related to the film. So if the characters are walking through a chocolate factory, for example, the dispensers would release a chocolate-smelling spray.

Smell-o-vision was a disaster. Sometimes the smells were too strong or too weak. Sometimes they were delayed and the characters would be out of the factory by the time the smell of chocolate hit you. Sometimes the scent just smelled like chemicals. And even if the odor worked perfectly, critics said that the smells just weren't necessary and distracted from the actual movie.

But the idea has persisted. Some movie producers have provided movie-goers with scratch-and-sniff cards when they enter the theater. Then when a big black number 1 appears on the screen, viewers are supposed to scratch the circle labeled 1 on their card and sniff. The idea of Smell-o-vision continues.

It makes me think about the smells of Christmas. What are the smells you encounter this time of year?

- Piney scent of the Christmas tree
- Peppermint of candy canes
- Aromas of freshly baked cookies
- Woody smell of a fire burning in the fireplace
- Scented candles that smell like cinnamon or berries
- My family always gives and receives oranges on Christmas, so that's a smell I associate with Christmas morning

Usually, when we think of the smells of Christmas, we think of pleasant aromas. They should make a Smell-o-vision Christmas movie! That would make it all worthwhile!

Our associations of smells with Christmas sum up our view of how Christmas should be. The holiday, like its smells, should be familiar, calm, pleasant, homey. And if it's not, we think something has gone wrong. If it's not that nice picturesque holiday, things are off.

But I'd like to consider the very first Christmas – what it looked like, what it sounded like, and yes, especially what it smelled like. I've had special odor dispensers installed in the church (they are called "your imagination"), so please join me as we go on the Smell-o-vision version of the First Christmas.

Mary and Joseph walk down the road. They are traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a trip of about 80 miles. Mary is pregnant. All around them, the road is busy with people walking to their ancestral hometowns for the census. The smell of sweat hangs in the air. The road runs through farmland, so occasionally the scent of fresh olives can be discerned in the breeze. But mostly, it is the smell of humanity that surrounds the two travelers.

Finally, the couple makes it to Bethlehem. They come to the home of one of Joseph's distant relatives. The guest room, sometimes called the inn, is occupied by another family, more relatives who have come for the census. So Joseph and Mary take up residence in the stable. The stable is attached to the house, as was the custom, so that during the chilly nights, the warmth of the animals helps heat the house.

Mary and Joseph make themselves comfortable in the stable. They sniff the air. Animals. Not clean animals who get regular baths, but farm animals. It's the same kind of smell that assaults you when you walk into the hippo house at the zoo, that makes you crinkle your nose. The musk of a donkey, a goat, maybe a cow, and their manure in the hay. And the hay! Wet hay that makes you sneeze.

Joseph and Mary make do. They settle in, and in time, they get used to the smells. Eventually, Mary goes into labor. A midwife is called in; the other women of the family help. Chaos ensues, and at the end of it, a healthy baby boy is born. The child is washed clean. Then, since there is no crib and no guest room, Mary swaddles the baby and lays him in a feeding trough. The old wood still smells faintly of old grain and corn and slop.

When things have finally calmed down and the baby has fallen asleep, some shepherds slam open the door and come traipsing in. They reek of mud, sweat, and wet wool. Earthy smells that would be okay being left outside. The sheep are nearby too, but thankfully they stay outside. The wet wool smell permeates the stable though.

The scent is forgotten for a few moments as the shepherds tell everyone in the house the incredible story of an angel appearing to them and proclaiming that a new king has been born, and he's sleeping in a manger, a feeding trough. And sure enough, there he is. After much excited talking and shouting and singing and laughing, the shepherds leave. Thankfully, they take the reek of the mud and wet wool with them.

Finally, Mary picks up her baby and holds him to her chest. She puts her nose to the crown of his head and inhales deeply. Do you know that smell, the smell of a newborn baby? It is unlike any other smell and indescribable. It is the smell of new life. The smell of hope and anticipation, of good things to come. Mary soaks it in.

The smells of Christmas. They are a far cry from our freshly baked cookies and sweet oranges. The real smells of Christmas are pretty unpleasant, in general – sweat, animals, mud, manure.

And yet... it is into this smelly mess that Jesus comes. Emmanuel, God is with us, not just in Hallmark moments, but also in the gross, messy, smelly reality of our lives. In the times when things still most earthy or unassuming or just plain messy, God shows up.

And throughout his life, Jesus continues to demonstrate this. Jesus doesn't only interact with people who smell good or people who have good manners or say the right things or behave perfectly. Jesus hangs out with homeless beggars, lepers, with tax collectors, with smelly fishermen. Over and over again, Jesus reminds us that God isn't just for the people who are proper; God is also for smelly folks, people who are just getting by.

And that truth begins tonight. It begins with Jesus' birth. Into the mess, the smelliness, the chaos of our lives, God shows up. All we need to do is pay attention. And when he does, say "Alleluia! Praise God!"

Amen.

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