Come to Your Senses During Lent – Noticing the Presence of God.

Smell

Matthew 2:9-11 March 30, 2025

John 12:1-8 Kimby Young

Of all our senses, I understand that the sense of smell is most likely to trigger a memory. I’m sure there is some scientific reason for this link. A distinct smell reminds us of a particular moment. For me, cinnamon and spices remind me of Christmas growing up. Campfire smoke takes me back to kum bah yah and story telling. An ocean breeze, a mountain spring, a barn, a garden – all have distinct smells and probably remind us of another place and time. Sometimes the smells and the memories are not so pleasant. Often there is strong emotion linked to these memories and senses. Incense in worship is often used in other faith traditions to bring the memory of prayer and the powerful presence of God.

In the scripture for today, the frankincense and myrrh brought by the wise men in their visit to the baby Jesus offers a smell intended to invoke meaning. Frankincense was used in worship at the time and was connected to the priestly role of Jesus. Myrrh was used in embalming and burial. It was thought to foreshadow the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross. In fact, myrrh mixed with wine vinegar was presented to Jesus to drink on the cross. It was intended to have a numbing effect to soothe pain. Incidentally, Jesus refused the drink and received the full power of the pain. Both frankincense and myrrh had healing properties and were widely used in medicines of the day. This pointed toward the healing miracles of Jesus, and God’s gift of healing for all through Jesus Christ. The smells of Jesus birth pointed to the life Jesus would live – worship, healing, suffering, death and life for all.

The second reading for today from John also is filled with meaning. It says, “The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume” that Mary poured out over Jesus’ feet. The whole house was wrapped in this powerful smell. I’m sure it triggered lots of thoughts and connections for the disciples and others gathered. You see, this was an extravagant indulgence of fragrance, an extravagant out pouring of love on Mary’s part. She meant this act to be overwhelming and memorable. Rather than a dab of oil to cleanse away the street dirt and smells of the day, Mary poured out a wealth of goodness. So much that Judas objected and called it a waste. But it wasn’t a waste. It was a message of love and thanksgiving.

You see, this particular perfume was used in burial rituals. Saved by families and used a little bit at a time over a full year of mourning to cover a loved one’s body in burial. It is believed that Mary and Martha might have bought this oil to use for their beloved brother Lazarus. But Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Just one week prior to this meal, just one chapter before this story, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead and called him out of the tomb into new life. This was a foreshadowing of Jesus own resurrection. Mary was not just washing Jesus’ feet, she was pouring out her love and gratitude. Mary and Martha would no longer need this oil to care for Lazarus. They were thanking Jesus for his extraordinary gift of their brother’s life. And they wanted everyone to know it. They wanted everyone to remember – not the perfume but the gratitude and the gift of life. Remember smells invoke memory. From that moment on any time disciples smelled that perfume they would remember resurrection. Think how often that perfume used at burials would remind disciples of the resurrection promised in Jesus Christ. Every single time it was used for the rest of their lives. They would remember Jesus and the power of resurrection.

I don’t know whether Mary knew all that or not, or if she was just showing her love. But God knew it. And Jesus knew the power of the fragrance. Jesus knew that in about a week from that moment, the disciples would experience the death of Jesus. Perhaps they would smell the burial perfume and think of this moment of gratitude. Jesus says to the disciples that Mary prepares his body for burial. But they don’t understand. In fact, if you notice the scripture in verse 7, Jesus says, “She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.” Do you notice? Jesus says Mary and Martha bought it for Jesus’ burial and now they are pouring it out ahead of time. Do you think that means Mary and Martha knew they wouldn’t need a year’s worth of burial perfume for Jesus because Jesus would not be in that tomb? Do you think they understood that like Lazarus Jesus would be raised to new life? Do you think they knew that Jesus had already conquered death and that new life was possible for all? I don’t know whether they knew. But Jesus knew.

Jesus knew that in one week he would die on a cross – a painful purposeful death intended to conquer death forever and for everyone. Jesus knew that three days after that death Jesus would be resurrected to new life. Jesus knew. Death no longer has power over us. Death is no longer the end of the story. New life, eternal life, is the gift of God to all who believe.

This powerful dramatic story of a woman pouring out love and oil over Jesus, is full of meaning this Lenten season. We don’t have the visceral experience today of the smell of the perfume, the sound of the splash, the touch of the hands, the tears, the smiles, the love of that moment. We can only imagine. But we do have the memory of the life of Jesus, of the week of Holy week, of the death on the cross, of the waiting by the tomb, and of the miraculous joyful day of resurrection. We know the story. And we have memories of Jesus in our own lives – the way God has loved us, the call of Jesus to us, the response of the Spirit in and among us. We have felt the impact of this story and of the story of the last day on earth for Jesus our Savior.

We are still three weeks away from Easter. As our Lenten journey continues, the invitation remains to experience God with you in Jesus Christ Word made flesh. Notice the moments in the weeks ahead when God speaks to you, nudges you, reminds you of grace. Pay attention.

And perhaps this week, respond as Mary did, with gushing gratitude and overwhelming love. Remember Christ with you. Rejoice. And share the love you have been given.

Amen.

March 30 – Smell

Matthew 2:9-11

When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’s feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” (He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.