

Psalm 115:2-8

Why should the nations say,
‘Where is their God?’
Our God is in the heavens;
he does whatever he pleases.
Their idols are silver and gold,
the work of human hands.
They have mouths, but do not speak;
eyes, but do not see.
They have ears, but do not hear;
noses, but do not smell.
They have hands, but do not feel;
feet, but do not walk;
they make no sound in their throats.
Those who make them are like them;
so are all who trust in them.

2 Corinthians 1:3-5

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ.

The God Who Comforts

The Nose of God

We've been at this sermon series for quite a while now. As we've considered the incarnation God taking on human flesh as Jesus of Nazareth, we've thought about the eyes and ears of Jesus, the hands and feet of Jesus, and the mouth of Jesus. I wonder how many of you thought that I would skip over Jesus' nose. The nose is mentioned in the psalm, after all. But what do we know about the nose of God? Aesthetically speaking, we don't know anything about Jesus' nose. Was it broad and flat? Was it a Roman nose, the kind that's familiar to us from ancient statues? Was it long and pointy? Was it short and upturned?

Well, while we may know nothing about what it looked like, we *do* know how Jesus' nose worked. It worked like any other human nose. And that means it enabled Jesus to *smell*. Did you know that smell is the most *primitive* sense? And that it's the most *evocative*, the one most closely associated with *memory*?

For me, this brings to mind the perfume *Shalimar*. Every Christmas my grandmother used to make all nine of her grandchildren flannel pajamas. And when she laid them in their boxes, she sprinkled them with *Shalimar* powder before she closed the box and wrapped them up. To this day, on the rare occasions that I smell Shalimar I am transported back to my grandmother's house. It's Christmas morning and right in front of me is a brand-new set of flannel PJs.

So once again we come to the question: *What does it matter?* What does it matter that Jesus had a human nose? What does it matter that he could smell? What does it matter that those smells *built memories*? What does it matter that our God who was once on earth, with all its smells and fragrances, its perfumes and odors, is once again in heaven *with memories of having been human*?

It means that when we pray, we pray to a God who not only *hears* us and *answers* us, but who *empathizes* with us, who *remembers* what it is to be what we are.

So what did Jesus smell?

What memories do those smells evoke?

Think back with me through the stories of Jesus' life and ministry, his betrayal and death.

As a newborn baby, Jesus' first smell would have been the scent of his mother; a scent that mingled with the familiar *sound* of her voice, the *taste* of her milk, and the *warm embrace* of her arms. This was a combination that told him he was *safe*, that he was *loved*.

And there in the background were the **stable smells**: the hay, the animals, leather and metal, dirt and wood, thatch and stone. These were the **earthy odors** of *creation*, of everyday *chores* and *struggles*.

Add to those common odors the more **exotic aromas** that surrounded the magi: the warm tang of the cedar chests filled with gold, the sharp spiciness of frankincense, the bitterness of myrrh.

These were the **rare fragrances** of *kings*, the scent of *power* and *wealth*.

And eight days later the infant Jesus was brought into the temple, a place he would frequent throughout his life. There he encountered a **whiff** of the burnt sacrifices his parents offered in accordance with the law. This is an **aroma**, the Old Testament tells us, that is pleasing to the Almighty: the aroma of *sacrifice* and *obedience*, of *forgiveness* and *reconciliation*.

Then, as Jesus grew, he learned his earthly father's trade. He worked as a carpenter surrounded by the **scents** of cedar, olive wood, acacia trees, and fruitwoods. The **smell** of sawdust and shavings filled his

head, creating memories of *hard work*, of *pride* in craftsmanship, reminders of the *joy* of creation.

Then, at his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus encountered the **smells** of the river, of water and grass, clean air, damp earth, and sweaty humanity. And in the midst of that scene, crowded with reminders of *creation*, there would be the memory of the *divine*, of a voice proclaiming, "This is my son, in whom I am well-pleased."

And then his years of ministry began, years of walking and teaching, healing and touching. And Jesus' nostrils were assaulted with not just what is *good* about creation, but also with what has gone *wrong*. Jesus ministered outside the towns, where he met lepers who brought with them the *nauseating odor* of *rotting flesh*.

Jesus ministered during the night at sea, when he calmed the wind and the waves, amidst the sharp **smell** of *ozone* and *sea*, *fear* and *sweat*.

He ministered at a dinner party in Simon's house, where he taught about forgiveness and love, all the while surrounded by the **aromas** of a *sumptuous feast*, punctuated by the *pungent fragrance* of the *perfumed ointment* that was rubbed onto his feet.

Jesus ministered outside of Bethany where he raised Lazarus from the dead. There the *stomach-turning stench* of three days' worth of *decay* could not be covered by any amount of *fragrant burial spices*.

Jesus ministered on earth until finally he was betrayed and crucified. And at the beginning of that last Passover Meal Jesus took up a basin and towel and gently washed the *dirty, smelly* feet of his friends and disciples, modeling for them a ministry of *service*, *cleansing*, and *restoration*. Then he shared the traditional Passover meal with his disciples. Let me read you this description of a first

century Passover Meal. As I read, imagine the smells that the words evoke.

The Passover meal was ... eaten reclining, a symbol of being free persons. Four cups of **wine** mixed with water were passed around during the meal. . . The occasion began with a benediction over the Kiddush cup and a benediction for the day. **Green herbs, bitter herbs, and a fruit puree** seasoned with **spices** and **vinegar** were eaten. Then in the dining room proper the second cup was mixed but not yet drunk. The son asked his father, "**Why is this night different from all other nights?**" And the father gave instructions about the people's history, "Beginning with the disgrace and ending with the glory." The first part of the Passover Hallel was sung responsively and the Haggadah cup was drunk. The meal proper began with the blessing of unleavened bread, to which the guests said, "Amen." Each person used **bread** to scoop food from the dish and tasted at least some of the **lamb**. The third cup was called the "cup of blessing." With the fourth cup the remaining Hallel Psalms (115-118) were sung and the gathering concluded. Which of the last three cups was the "cup of blessing" of the Last Supper is disputed, but presumably it was the third.

(Backgrounds of Early Christianity by Everett Ferguson, p. 523)

So it was amidst the scents of *fruit* and *vinegar*, of *bitter herbs* and *unleavened bread*, that Jesus lifted a glass of *sweet wine*, and told them of his willingness to shed his *blood* in order to give them *forgiveness and life*.

Then, throughout his arrest and trial and crucifixion, there was the scent of *blood*, of *fear*, of *death*. And all of these memories:
Of safety and love; of hard work and struggles,
Of power and wealth; of powerlessness and poverty,
Of sacrifice and obedience; of forgiveness and reconciliation,
Memories of humanity and divinity; of decay and birth,
Of blood and wine; of disease and healing,
Memories of death and of life. . .
All of these memories *Jesus took with him back to heaven*.

And when we pray to God out of a need to feel safe and loved because our world is crumbling around us, our Lord knows what that feels like.

When we thank God for the strength and opportunity to work hard at something, or when we ask for help when we struggle because we feel weak and powerless, God knows how we feel.

Jesus *empathizes* with the prayers we pray out of our humanity: the prayers of our frailty, our hopes, our fears, our love, even our hate. Jesus empathizes with the prayers of our loneliness, our despair, our joy, our pride, our shame. And out of that empathy, God gives us comfort. This is comfort that *comes alongside us*, rather than *looking down* at us. It is comfort that *understands*, rather than *presumes*. In that **comfort** we find **acceptance**; **acceptance** of *who* we are, *where* we are, with all our faults and fears.

And in that **comfort** we also find an offer of **forgiveness** and a chance to change; a chance to overcome our fears, a chance to correct our faults. With this **forgiveness** comes **hope**: the **hope** of *healing*, the **hope** of *restoration*.

For having been *accepted* and *forgiven*, we then have hope for the *present as well as the future*, because we understand that God has taken us *as we are* and is turning us into *what we were meant to be*.

And with that gift of comfort comes a responsibility: the responsibility to comfort others. We are called to comfort others as Jesus comforts us. We are to comfort out of *empathy*, not *sympathy*. We are to comfort with *compassion* and *understanding*.

What does that kind of comfort look like? First of all, it means being *present* with others, *listening* to them without judgment, *coming alongside* them in their pain and fear, in their joy and

sorrow, just as Jesus did with us, when he came from heaven to earth to dwell among us. Comforting like Jesus means accepting people *where they are right now, not where we think they should be.*

Then it means offering *forgiveness*: the forgiveness that only comes through Jesus Christ. It means showing these people how, having accepted *Jesus'* forgiveness, they can learn to forgive *themselves* as well as others.

Bringing comfort means offering these new children of God the gift of hope: the hope of healing, the hope of restoration.

Then their wounded spirits can be *healed*, their shame *removed*, their fears *relieved*, their debts *repaid*, their pain *redeemed*.

Then these *beloved children of God* will find their relationships restored: with God, with their families, even with themselves.

That's why God came to earth: to bring us forgiveness and hope and restoration. And Jesus had a nose so that he could smell and remember from his own experience what it is to be human. So know that, when we pray, we pray to a God who not only *hears us* and *answers us*, but one who *empathizes with us, remembering* what it is to be what we are. We pray to a God who *brings comfort* in ways only someone who has walked our way before can bring comfort.

The forgiveness and hope Jesus offers comes to us in such a way that not only *heals us* and *gives us hope*, but also causes us to offer that same forgiveness and hope to others. The one who is comforted becomes the one who comforts.

In that way our lives and ministries become fragrant offerings pleasing to our God; our God who had a nose that smelled, our God who remembers what it is to be human. AMEN