

### **Luke 2:6-7**

*“And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.”*

Have you ever smelled the inside a barn? I'm talking about a real barn, with horses and goats and a cow. Matter of fact, throw in a dozen chickens. Ever smelled that? Do this with me. Take a deep breath. What do you smell? Do you smell anything? In this season of Advent as we make our journey to the manger, we do so in the comfort of our church pews. We light our Advent candles, we place our pretty symbols on our tree, we hang our pretty Advent banners, we believe that all is well and happy in Bethlehem, and we forget that the time when Jesus was born was oppressive; we also forget that the place where Jesus was born was, dark dirty and smelled like cow manure.

Think about it. How many manger scenes have you ever seen that actually portray the event like it really was? None! Of course we clean things up; we spruce up the manger itself making into something it was not; we clean up the cows and sheep, some have even put bows on the animals. We have Mary looking so sweet and calm. Did you know that in Christian art, there are almost no paintings of Mary pregnant? The "delicate condition" is not what we think of for a good Christmas picture. Instead, we have a delicate looking Mary riding along on a small donkey with Joseph at her side,

and then, poof! Like magic, there is the baby lying there in the manger and Mary nearby ... and strange as it seems Mary looks just like she did the day before Jesus was born – sweet, calm! How can she have been calm, having just given birth in a stable and on top of this the government wants to kill her new born son. Today the world paints a beautiful picture, but this picture has nothing to do with the truth. We have disinfected the whole scene. There are no smells, no labor pains, no complaining, no rooster crowing, no cows mooing, no naked baby crying, instead the scene is serene and peaceful, and Jesus looks like he was born wearing a onsie from Baby's R Us! We have forgotten what it was really like.

In a Christmas devotion, Roger Douglas tells the story of a four-year-old girl named Suki. After her baby brother was born she asked her parents if she could have some time alone with her brother. Her parents were a little concerned. They were aware that some children are jealous of newborns. There were afraid she might try to hurt her new brother, but they finally agreed to let her have a few minutes alone with him, but they listened outside the door.

To their surprise, Suki leaned over her baby brother's crib and asked her newborn brother, "Hey, baby, what does God look like? I am beginning to forget."

We too have forgotten. We have lived so long with an antiseptic manger that we have forgotten what it was really like. Take our churches; even today our churches give us antiseptic pictures of what is supposed to be real life. TV evangelists put on grand productions so that people can be delivered from everything from drugs to demons to hangnails. In the name of God, preachers ask people to make "seed offerings" so that they will be financially rewarded; the church has even sold out to the politics of the right and the left. Many church people today believe just saying "I believe" is all they need to do, and that they can go on living for themselves.

A minister friend told me of the church he once served. In a nice way, they told him they expected him to look presentable and always wear a shirt and tie every time he went out in public. He said they never asked him if he preached the gospel message; if he was sleeping around; if he was an alcoholic or a drug addict or if ever he ever had or if he had ever killed anybody. All they were concerned about was that he wore a shirt and tie and

how he looked in public. Look at the Christmas programs during this season on TV. We have become nothing more than a slick production of beautiful people doing beautiful things. We have taken the smell out of the manure. We have forgotten the real story and we have forgotten our story.

On the one hand the church is concerned, more concerned, about its image, than the world it's in that's going to hell in a hand basket. Sex, drugs, violence, greed rule the day. People are hurting, marriages are falling apart, and criminals are getting younger and younger. And our solution ... build bigger jails. It's a dirty, nasty situation and people are desperately in need of help.

It's tragic ... the world is desperate for help, and they have forgotten where that help is, but we haven't, have we? You haven't forgotten, have you? You, see, like those shepherds that went off to tell others, this season, we too have a message for the world. We have the good news. And our message comes, not out of the slick pages of one of those cute Christmas cards; it comes out of our own experience. You see, we have been to that manger. We have seen the donkeys and the cows and the goats and chickens, and we know what they smell like.

“It’s the saints who have a sense of sin,” said one writer, “because the saints know who God is.” But we also know something else. It is precisely in the mire and muck of that scene, there is the middle of all the manure and smell that God comes to us, and like those first shepherds, we need to tell our story.

In the church Christmas pageant a five-year-old was given the part of the angel who announced the birth of Jesus to the shepherds. He practiced his lines over and over, “*Fear not: for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people.*” He was ready, but on opening night the church was full.

As he came on to the stage and saw all those people he forgot his lines. In a panic he blurted out, “Don’t be scared! I’ve got good news for everybody!” “Don’t be scared! I’ve got good news for everybody!” Tell your neighbor that! That should be our message. That is the word our world needs to hear. God came into the world in the least expected place.

He knows what life is like. He knows our struggles. He knows what we feel. We are God’s messengers and that is our message. Into this dark world -- God has brought light. Dr. Judith Chandler, the Administrator of the

Continuing Ed. Program at Furman wrote a Christmas play a few years ago, and as a conclusion she wrote, “If on a single day, September 11, 2001, we can grind commerce to a halt; pull every plane from the sky; shut down the stock market; pre-empt every TV program; and re-arrange the professional football schedule, we can do anything we want to badly enough. We have the power...as individuals...as Christians...as a nation...as a world. We can house the homeless; we can comfort the hurting; we can lift the down trodden. We can overcome our differences, and learn to live together in peace and harmony. That is the real message of Christmas. That is the message our world needs to hear.

2 Corinthians 2:15, allow this passage to permeate your very being, *“For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.”* This means we are to be the sweet aroma of Christ to those around us. Do you smell anything? Are you a sweet aroma to those around you, or are you foul smelling? Do those who are hurting feel your compassion or do they feel rejection and condemnation? Does the world around you hear sweet things from your lips or are you constantly negative and/or hard in your speech?

A minister was giving a children's sermon to a large group of children one morning. She ended the sermon by saying, "And God loves you and you and you." Way down at the end of the group where she did not point, a little voice asked, "What about me?" The light of the love of God has come into our lives and has brought us hope, forgiveness, and new life. The good news is that we are all included ... Remember the smell; remember what Christmas is really about. It's about love, God's love and God loves you and you and you; and Yes, even you. We are all called to be the "*aroma of Christ.*" Do those around you smell anything? Do you smell anything?