

The Scent of Christmas

My Christmas playlists would not enliven any holiday party. I'll enjoy an occasional Burl Ives or Brenda Lee classic like everyone else, but my selections tend toward the reflective; sometimes acoustic, sometimes choral. One carol that I have heard and enjoyed many times struck me this year as being really peculiar. *What Is This Lovely Fragrance?* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PForCxxsWw>) is a variation on an old French carol, *Quelle est cette odeur agréable?*

It begins, "Shepherds, what is this lovely fragrance filling the air this wondrous night?" How strange to zero in on a smell! The Divine Presence has a scent, and it is wafting out to the fields where the aromas are not fragrant at all, amid flocks of smelly sheep and bands of shepherds whose personal airs are pretty much that of the sheep. A lovely fragrance is signaling the Incarnation. Of the five human senses, who would have thought that this one would detect the Word becoming flesh? Surprising. Remarkable.

The surprise becomes astonishment when the sense of sight is invoked as the carol unfolds the scenario. "What is this light, so clear, so brilliant, filling the sky before our eyes?" Remember, there is no electricity. Night is night; pitch black, dark to the point a torch is thought to be sufficient. And now an intense light defies this darkness. Unexpected. Improbable.

And then, an amazing discovery, "In Bethlehem, in a lowly manger, lies our Redeemer, Lord, and King," pronounces the carol. God among the beasts. The Almighty in humble, even humiliating, surroundings. The Creator risking birth.

The peculiarity of this Christmas carol appeals to me. I feel as if we are aching for redemption – our country, our world – and redemption has the qualities of the lovely fragrance, the brilliant light, the unlikely beginning of a Redeemer's life. Surprising; improbable; an event that breaks into reality in an almost disruptive way; unexpected; without precedent.

Much of what is happening in the world suggests that we will get more of the same: division, anger, intolerance, continued suffering for many, violence on so many levels. We need to be surprised by redemption, a waft of the fragrance of God among us, a light that will overcome darkness, the meanest of human circumstance becoming the dwelling place of the Almighty. For people who are open to the unlikely and who hope for the improbable, these weeks leading to Christmas can be a graced time when the sentiments of this peculiar carol ring true.