

“Sensates: Loving God by Engaging Our Senses”

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Tenth and last in a Series *Loving God Many Ways*

Ezekiel 1 and 3 (selections)

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. . . I was with the exiles at the Chebar River when the heavens opened and I saw visions of God. . . .

As I watched, suddenly a driving storm came out of the north, a great cloud flashing fire, with brightness all around. At its center, in the middle of the fire, there was something like gleaming amber. And inside that were forms of four living creatures.

This was what they looked like: Each had the form of a human being, though each had four faces and four wings. Their feet looked like proper feet, but the soles of their feet were like calves' hooves, and they shone like burnished bronze. Human hands were under their wings on all four sides. All four creatures had faces and wings, and their wings touched each other's wings. . . .

Regarding the creatures' forms: they looked like blazing coals, like torches. Fire darted about between the creatures and illuminated them, and lightning flashed from the fire. The creatures looked like lightning streaking back and forth. . . .

Then I heard the sound of their wings when they moved forward. It was like the sound of mighty waters, like the sound of the Almighty, like the sound of tumult or the sound of an army camp. . . .

I heard the sound of someone speaking: “Human one, eat this thing that you've found. Eat this scroll and go, speak to the house of Israel.” So I opened my mouth, and he fed me the scroll. He said to me: “Human one, feed your belly and fill your stomach with this scroll that I give you.” So I ate it, and in my mouth it became as sweet as honey.

Ezekiel 1:1b,4,5-9a 13-14,24,28b; 3:1-3
Common English Bible

After hearing that, you might be reluctant to do this, but please trust me. Close your eyes, and breath in through your nose.

What does worship **smell** like? Do you smell wood? Old building? Maybe those sitting close to you?

What does worship **feel** like? The touch of a hymn book? The firmness of a pew? The

warmth of the day mingled with the breeze from the fans?

What does worship **taste** like? A bit of bread, mixed with grape juice? The candy your Mom gave you to keep you quiet?

What does worship **sound** like? Organ pipes lifting? Piano strings sounding? The preacher speaking? The congregation praying? Or, silence?

Now, open your eyes. What does worship **look** like?

Ezekiel the prophet received a vision of the presence of God. He saw, and it was indescribably wild. He heard, and it was indescribably loud. He tasted, and it was so sweet. The presence of God was an onslaught to his senses.

Our worship is usually not like that. Still, even our worship engages our senses: seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching. For some of us, those senses are vital to how we experience and show love to God.

II

Today we finish up our look at different styles and ways we love God, and are open to God, and experience God's presence. God makes us so diverse. God works with us, accommodating to our different personalities, experiences, and formation journeys. In many different ways, we can love the one God who has come to us in Jesus and fills us with the Holy Spirit.

Gary Thomas develops this in his book, *Sacred Pathways*. I've listed his nine pathways in your Sunday news.¹ This last one we are looking at is the Sensate pathway. Sensates

¹ Gary Thomas, *Sacred Pathways: Discover Your Soul's Path to God* revised edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010). Here are his short definitions of each.

Caregivers love God by caring for others.

Traditionalists love God with our ancestors.

Activists love God by confronting injustice.

Contemplatives love God through adoration.

Ascetics love God in solitude and simplicity.

Enthusiasts love God by engaging mystery and celebration.

Naturalists love God outdoors.

Intellectuals love God with their minds.

Sensates love God by engaging their senses.

I've changed the order Thomas presents them, to fit my planned order for this series. I've also modified some of the descriptions.

come alive through sensory experience: alive to what's around them, alive to themselves, and alive to God.²

III

Let me show you some examples.

Seeing

Henri Nouwen was an accomplished professor. Yet it was while beholding Rembrandt's painting [*The Return of the Prodigal Son*](#) that God truly captured him. Listen:

*Every detail of the father's figure—his facial expression, his posture, the colors of his dress, and, most of all, the still gesture of his hands—speaks of the divine love for humanity that existed from the beginning and ever will be.*³

*. . . most of all, it was the hands—the old man's hands—as they touched the boy's shoulders that reached me in a place where I had never been reached before.*⁴

*I was, indeed, the son exhausted from long travels; I wanted to be embraced; I was looking for a home where I could feel safe.*⁵

What do you see that helps you love God?

Hearing

Here are some snippets from songs.⁶ How do they make you feel? I guarantee that there will be different reactions here to each song.

["Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy"](#) by The Andrews Sisters

["Blue Cliffs of Dover"](#) by Vera Lynn

["Two Out of Three Ain't Bad"](#) by Meatloaf

["Hallelujah"](#) by Leonard Cohen

["Celebration"](#) by Kool and the Gang

["OK Blue Jays"](#) by The Bat Boys

["Sweet Child O' Mine"](#) by Guns 'N Roses

["Stairway to Heaven"](#) by Led Zeppelin

² <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/sensate>

³ Henri Nouwen, [*The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*](#) (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 93.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶ I just played short, 20 second clips of the songs. While these are links to videos, I didn't show any images.

We could do the same with favourite hymns or choruses. Music moves us. Music sticks with us. Sound can help us show love to God.

What music helps you express your love for God?

Touching

You are baptised, and cool water splashes you. Without the touch of water, it isn't baptism.

You are teary-eyed. A hand rests on yours. With touch, we say "I'm here with you."

Gary Thomas talks of carrying a nail in his pocket during the Season of Lent. Its hardness, its sharpness, its coldness were constant reminders of Jesus' suffering. Touching the nail made it more real.⁷

Many Christian traditions practice making the sign of the cross. Tracing its beams over our bodies as we pray presses on us that we die and rise with Jesus.

Touch communicates. God can use it to say, "I am here with you."

Tasting

A Seder meal is how Jews celebrate the Passover. They worship and eat in their home, with special food.

- *Maror*, horseradish root, and *Chazeret*, romaine lettuce, to taste the bitter harshness of slavery.
- *Charoset*, a sweet paste of fruit and nuts, to taste the mortar used to make Pharaoh's bricks.
- *Karpas*, usually parsley, dipped in salt water, to taste the tears.
- *Zeroa*, a shank roasted lamb, to represent the lambs whose blood protected the slaves.
- *Beitzah*, a hard-boiled egg, to symbolize the festival sacrifice in the Temple.

They don't just tell the story of God freeing them from slavery. They taste it.

We taste the bread. We taste the juice or wine. We taste and see that God is good!⁸

⁷ Thomas, 69.

⁸ Psalm 34.8.

Smelling

Baby shampoo . . . his cologne, her perfume . . . bacon . . . Our sense of smell is so strong, so invading, so evoking of memories.

When Jesus was born, magi gave smelly things: frankincense and myrrh.⁹ When Jesus was eating, a woman took a perfume and poured it over his feet. The house filled with the fragrance.¹⁰ Days after Jesus was buried, women brought spices to his tomb to cover the decay. But they were not needed!¹¹

Following the ancient practices in the Bible, many traditions burn incense, sometimes lavishly.¹² The book of Revelation pictures the rising, smelly smoke as the prayers of God's people coming before God.¹³

Are there smells that help you worship?

IV

Loving God with our seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling . . . loving God with our "senses" makes a lot of "sense" to Sensates. Maybe that's something we in our tradition have neglected. For good reasons, the Protestant Reformers were suspicious of the excesses they saw in worship. Including sensory excesses. The senses, they understood, are very powerful.

Like all of the pathways, the Sensate Pathway has its temptations. The big one is to miss or misuse that power senses have. Colours and images, sounds and music, smells and tastes and things we can touch . . . all can create strong emotional reactions. Isn't that what body spray ads sell? "You will be irresistible." It doesn't work (I tried), but it plays on something we know is true. Our senses are powerful. For instance, I can sink into a worship song, and have a profound experience. But I might just stop with the song and its beauty, not moving through it to worship God whom it is about. And, in the hands of someone unscrupulous or just careless, the power of senses can be manipulated.

Be aware, then, of the temptation to misuse our senses. However, I'm glad that our tradition of Christianity, shaped by the Reformation and, later, Methodist and Presbyterian sensibilities, is becoming more open to using the senses. We're using colour and art, and

⁹ Matthew 2.10-11

¹⁰ John 12.1-8

¹¹ Luke 23.54-24.9

¹² See Thomas, 68f.

¹³ Revelation 8.1-4

varieties of music. We're realizing we can worship God with our whole body.

God made us as bodies and souls, and said that, together, they are good. God entered into creation as a body named Jesus. Jesus had all five senses. He healed bodies. In his bodily death and bodily resurrection, he redeemed bodies. He redeemed our senses.

We can use our bodies to glorify God—including our skin, our nose, our tastebuds, our ears and our eyes.

It makes sense!

Praise be to God. Amen!