

God's nose

## **When COVID took my sense of smell, I was drawn to the Bible's description of God's.**

by [Melissa Florer-Bixler](#) in the [September 22, 2021](#) issue



(Illustration © Softulka / iStock / Getty)

I wait for the bright smell to punch through the air from a tomato's green stem. The plant, nestled here in my garden, emits a scent through its hairlike trichomes, cautioning creatures to retreat. But today my ability to assess this warning is gone.

In July I lost my sense of smell, one casualty of a breakthrough COVID-19 infection that swept through my family. I've since learned that smell is the most overlooked of my five senses. I don't know when I stopped being able to judge if fruit was ripe or the laundry in need of immediate attention. But five days after my diagnosis, I twisted the cap off a bottle of vinegar and breathed in the strange sensation of nothing.

"Smell this," I commanded my daughter, with an urgency she responded to without question. The acetic acid wafting from the bottle caused her to leap back with a jolt, the presence of fermentation registering through her whole body.

The condition of losing one's olfactory capacity is called anosmia, a deficit significant for human flourishing because smells warn us of danger. With anosmia I am unable to register disgust. My brain offers no counsel about the state of public bathrooms or rotting leftovers. I have no adverse reaction to the ordinary parenting tasks that involve bodily fluid that would, in other times, make me turn away to fight back a surge of nausea.

In this strange season of anosmia, as my brain struggles with the absence of scent, I have been drawn back to the Bible's description of God's olfactory sense. The first description of God's capacity to smell is found in Genesis, when Noah cooks up a spit of meat as a gift to God upon departing the ark. The Bible describes God encountering this smell, sweet and savory. It is this smell that causes God to make a promise: God will never again smite the earth.

We might read this as a crude transaction, a God appeased by burning flesh. But in this month of my brain's unyoking scent and experience I've come to appreciate how smell offers us more than warnings. Scent is memory, and in losing my smell I have become disconnected from my memory. This disorientation is subtle. It's as if a slide were supposed to fall into place with information through which I project what I hear, see, and feel. Instead, the slide is blank—and I search for what should be communicated. I've grasped at words to fill in the gaps, loading my mind with language to call back what is often indescribable—fecund, sharp, sour, pungent, crisp. How is it that a thing can smell green?

At their full function, the olfactory neurons in my nose sense a smell and report their finding to a part of the brain called the olfactory bulb. The olfactory bulb pulses information along nerve tissue to the limbic system. Here the amygdala and the hippocampus connect scent to memory and emotion. Along the line of our neurons, we are transported.

When my daughter was young, each time I left home for several days she would take a T-shirt I'd recently worn to bed and carry it with her during my absence. At night, she would tuck the shirt into her pillowcase, the memory of me lingering in the cotton. It appears that God also attaches scent to memory.

Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, God is in the habit of smelling things.

In Exodus, when Adonai descends from the clouds, Moses proclaims that here is God, merciful, gracious, and "wide in the nostrils"—what we translate now as long-

suffering or slow to anger. The inverse appears when God's nose is "hot," like the time when Moses refuses to believe God can use him to free the Hebrew people from their bondage in Egypt.

Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, God is in the habit of smelling. Offerings are like incense, a pleasing aroma to God. Like all of us, God inhales the air and breathes in scents that activate the capacity for memories and feelings. The more space in the nose, the more God can inhale—and the more God remembers, the more God feels, the more God responds.

I wonder what memory God attached to the smell of burnt offering from Noah's lonely sacrifice on Mount Ararat. At this point in the Bible, no burnt sacrifices have been offered by people or commanded by God. While the text gives us no answer, the connection between memory and scent, between emotional recall and aroma, help us move away from sacrificial transaction and toward the pathos of God.

This pathos, Abraham Heschel reminds us in *The Prophets*, is "not an idea of goodness, but a living care; not an immutable example, but an ongoing challenge, a dynamic relation between God and man." God loves, God remembers, and God "reacts intimately to the events of history." Noah offers God a present—Noah, the one who is righteous and whole, the one whose name means rest. Noah seems to know something intimate about the God he follows.

Perhaps the offering on the soaked mountaintop surrounded by receding deadly water tells us about the mutual love between God and Noah, an intimacy we are invited to witness. Noah knows God in a way that others do not, shares memories born of a common life in faithfulness. I do not know what the smell of burning meat triggered in God's memory, but the smell of that gift lends toward compassion for all creation.

Weeks after my COVID diagnosis, I pulled apart a head of garlic, crushed a bulb, held it close to my face, and inhaled. Cutting through the haze of the past month, assisted by cells that were repaired after the virus's damage, I sensed a faint trace of sharpness. This smell is summers harvesting garlic on a farm in Oregon. It is a hundred church potluck meals. It is the feeling of my childhood walking through fields dotted with onion grass and of my own daughter playing at her mud kitchen with wild onion in the backyard.

“God does not reveal himself in abstract absoluteness, but in a personal and intimate relation to the world,” writes Heschel. “He is also moved and affected by what happens in the world, and reacts accordingly. Events and human actions arouse in Him joy or sorrow, pleasure or wrath.” Like us, God smells the world—God remembers, and God is moved to compassion.