

Christmas in Seven Carols
Part 3: Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming
December 16, 2018
by Rev. Dr. Eric Elnes

Scriptures: Isaiah 11:1-6, 35:1-3 (KJV)
Poetry: "The Rose" by Amanda McBroom

I. The Unexpected Love

Roses have long served as a symbol of Jesus. In our 15th Century German carol this morning, "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming," the rose that blooms unexpectedly in winter points to Jesus:

*Lo, how a rose e're blooming from tender stem hath sprung,
of Jesse's lineage coming by faithful prophets sung;
it came a flow'r-et bright, amid the cold of winter
when half spent was the night.*

The second verse of our carol reveals that the winter rose is connected to an ancient prophecy of Isaiah, thought by Christians to predict the coming Messiah:

*Isaiah 'twas foretold it, the rose I have in mind;
with Mary we behold it, the virgin mother kind.
To show God's love aright she bore to us a Savior
when half spent was the night.*

In the original Hebrew of Isaiah's prophecy, it is a crocus that blooms in the desert, not a rose. Early translators of the Bible however, like those who produced the King James Version, misunderstood the Hebrew and translated "crocus" as "rose." The flower of Isaiah's vision is not a winter flower, either, but one that blooms unexpectedly in the desert: "the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose." (Isaiah 35:1)

Why does the carol speak of a winter rose, then, instead of a desert one like in Isaiah's vision? Probably it's because Christmas takes place in winter – at least in a place like Germany, in the northern hemisphere. Also, since there are no deserts in Germany, the author probably associates a winter rose with Isaiah's vision to retain the element of surprise that Isaiah's audience would have felt. You don't expect to find a rose blooming in winter just as you don't expect to find one blooming in the desert. Neither do you expect to find the Messiah born to a poor, unwed mother in a Bethlehem stable.

A century after this carol was written, another German would famously make the rose a centerpiece of his teaching about Jesus. That person was the Reformer, Martin Luther. If your background is Lutheran, you may recall that Martin Luther designed a special seal that features a rose to represent his theology. Here's how Luther himself explained its meaning:

First, there is a black cross in a heart that remains its natural color. This is to remind me that it is faith in the Crucified One that saves us. Anyone who believes from the heart will be justified (Romans 10:10). It is a black cross, which mortifies and causes pain, but it leaves the heart its natural color. It doesn't destroy nature, that is to say, it does not kill us but keeps us alive, for the just shall live by faith in the Crucified One (Romans 1:17). The heart should stand in the middle of a white rose. This is to show that faith gives joy, comfort, and peace—it puts the believer into a white, joyous rose. Faith does not give peace and joy like the world gives (John 14:27). This is why the rose must be white, not red. White is the color of the spirits and angels (cf. Matthew 28:3; John 20:12). This rose should stand in a sky-blue field, symbolizing that a joyful spirit and faith is a beginning of heavenly, future joy, which begins now, but is grasped in hope, not yet fully revealed. Around the field of blue is a golden ring to symbolize that blessedness in heaven lasts forever and has no end. Heavenly blessedness is exquisite, beyond all joy and better than any possessions, just as gold is the most valuable and precious metal.¹



For me personally, the rose has long been a symbol of Christ's living presence for us today, otherwise known as the Holy Spirit. Why? Because an experience of the Holy Spirit is something that words can't adequately describe – like the smell of a rose.

We all know what a rose smells like. Yet if you had never smelled a rose, could I describe what one smells like in a way that you would truly understand? I could devote the rest of this reflection to describing a rose's fragrance – how a rose can smell "fruity," often containing hints of raspberry, lemon, apricot, peach, and even banana, and how other aromas can sometimes be detected like tea, musk, and spices like anise, mulled wine, laurel leaf, and clover. Yet if you've never actually smelled a rose, I'm guessing that my description would only leave you with a headache – more confused than ever.

The only way I can really convey what it is like to experience a rose's fragrance is to describe it indirectly – how I respond to a rose's fragrance rather than the fragrance itself. For instance, when I smell a rose, something within me that had been anxious suddenly is peaceful; something that had been tight within me loosens; something that had been clenched tightly opens up. I often subconsciously breathe in deeply and my breath slows down. Often, I experience joy – even if only a faint, quiet joy – and that joy tends to linger even after I turn away. While this description conveys nothing of what a rose actually smells like, you would likely understand something of what I find so wonderful about roses even if you'd never smelled one.

An experience of the Holy Spirit works the same way. Millions of books, and chapters within books, have been written about what or who the Holy Spirit is, and what an experience of the Spirit is like, yet despite all the verbiage, these descriptions tend to sound like trying to describe the scent of a rose.

¹ From: Letter from Martin Luther to Lazarus Spengler, July 8, 1530 [WA Br 5:445]; tr. P. T. McCain

I often feel the Holy Spirit's "touch" when I meditate in the morning, or over the course of the day as I engage in conversation with others, or while walking in nature. Yet if you were to ask me what a "touch" of the Holy Spirit *literally* is – where it originates from, how it is conveyed to me, or even what it feels like to be touched by the Spirit, my explanation would probably leave you – and me – with a headache. I would have a very hard time describing it in any way that conveys what I'm trying to say. Yet if I were to describe what happens to me *in response to* the Holy Spirit's "touch," we might have a chance of understanding one another.

Curiously, I respond to the Holy Spirit very much like I respond to the scent of a rose – which is why the rose is a helpful symbol of the Spirit for me. I find myself unconsciously taking a deep breath in. I experience a sense of peace, spaciousness, openness. A touch of the Spirit usually results in feelings of joy – a lingering joy even if it's only a quiet joy that lingers.

If you ever wonder if you've been touched by the Holy Spirit, perhaps you can ask yourself this: "Did I feel like I feel after smelling a rose?" If you *really* want to know if you've experienced the Spirit's touch, you may also want to ask, "Did my feeling of peace, joy, openness, and freedom motivate me to act, or react, in a way that transmits this same experience to others? In other words, did it cause me to emit the "fragrance" of Christ to the world?"

II. Winter Rose

One of the problems with using the Bible to talk about what it is like to experience the Holy Spirit is that the examples the Bible offers are of such, well, "biblical" proportions. The experiences, and results of the experiences, are so dramatic that many people conclude that the Spirit couldn't possibly be concerned with the likes of them.

For instance, the prophet Isaiah seems to have experienced the Holy Spirit's touch quite a bit. His experiences even moved him to predict the coming of Jesus seven centuries later, at least according to Christians. Yet even if you discount the prophecies thought to foretell Jesus, there's still a lot of drama.

For instance, a number of Isaiah's prophecies come from a time when Israel was experiencing one of the greatest crises of its history; when the city of Jerusalem was besieged by 185,000 Assyrian soldiers who demanded that King Hezekiah and his people surrender or die. The prophet Isaiah had a series of visions that led him to believe that Hezekiah should not surrender, even though Hezekiah couldn't even muster 2,000 troops to stand against the invaders.

All logic would suggest – no demand – that Isaiah counsel Hezekiah to surrender immediately. Yet Isaiah gave the exact opposite counsel, stating that the "word of the Lord" was for Hezekiah to stand his ground, refusing to buckle under pressure by the Assyrians or even his own best advisors.

Once you smell a rose, you know a rose is present even if all you can see is a pile of dung. Isaiah knew what the "smell" of the Holy Spirit was like, even when the Spirit was giving him counsel that flew in the face of what seemed most logical.

Within days of Isaiah's conversation with Hezekiah, his counsel proved correct. A plague tore through the Assyrian camp, apparently started by mice or rats, that was so devastating that the army had to abort their mission and go home. This sudden turn of events is not only spoken of in the Bible but is confirmed by other ancient sources, including the Greek historian, Herodotus.

As inspiring as this story may be, does it inspire you to think that the Holy Spirit might touch you in a similar way, or does it leave you feeling like it's only people in the Bible who experience the Holy Spirit working in their lives?

If you're feeling like all this Holy Spirit stuff is only relevant to people who lived in biblical times, let me conclude with a brief story.

In the year 2000, Christmas Eve fell on a Sunday just as it did in 2017. I experienced a touch of the Holy Spirit that Sunday that was in no way dramatic. In fact, it was only in hindsight that I recognized it had all the qualities I normally associate with the Spirit. Yet the result of the Spirit's touch was quite dramatic. I am convinced it was responsible for saving the lives of my two daughters.

Sunday afternoon, I needed to run to Starbucks to pick up some gift cards for the church staff before the Christmas Eve services. The closest one was just a mile away. I'd be there and back within fifteen minutes. But I was at home alone with Arianna and Maren, who were 7 and 9 at the time. If I wanted to go to Starbucks, I'd have to pull them away from the movie they were watching, pack them in the Chevy Tracker I was driving at the time, only to head right back a few minutes later. And it was freezing cold outside by Scottsdale standards – probably 50 degrees!

"Hey girls," I said, "I need to run a quick errand so you're going to need to come with me." But just as those words left my mouth, a quiet thought hit me: "Do you *really* need to take them?"

"Of course I do!" I thought to myself. "I'm not one of those bad parents who leave young kids at home alone."

"Would you really be a 'bad parent' if you left them just for a few minutes?" came the response.

Neither Melanie nor I had ever left our children home alone for as much as a minute since the day they were born, so I felt guilty for even considering the question. Yet as I envisioned taking them versus leaving them, a feeling of peace kept quietly returning whenever I considered leaving them behind. That feeling was in sharp contrast to the frenetic activity of my brain, which was thinking, "What are you nuts? You've never done that before! What if the house catches on fire in the next fifteen minutes, or a burglar comes to the door, or invaders from outer space show up?"

Despite all my inner objections – both logical and illogical – whenever I envisioned leaving the girls behind, I felt like I feel when smelling a rose. Something inside that was anxious relaxed; something I was grasping let go; I breathed easy. Finally, I decided to trust my gut. Telling the

girls I would be right back, and giving them strict orders not to do anything but watch their movie or use the bathroom, I left. Also, Melanie was due home any minute.

I took off for Starbucks. After purchasing the gift cards, I was sitting at a stoplight at the intersection of McDonald Street and Hayden Boulevard less than a minute from home ... when a car ploughed into me from behind at 35 mph, sending my car careening into the middle of one of the busiest boulevards in all of Scottsdale!

Thankfully, no other cars were speeding down Hayden Blvd when I was pushed into the middle of it. And thankfully, I suffered no injury aside from whiplash, which 6 months of chiropractic therapy eventually resolved. But my vehicle was totaled, the back end of the Tracker having literally been crunched like an accordion clear up to the back of the front seats.

My daughters would have been sitting back there had I taken them with me. They weren't with me because, for the first time in their lives, I had left them behind – against my own best logic.

Can you see now why I pay so much attention to this weird Holy Spirit stuff? The Spirit's touches can be quite light and nearly imperceptible – like just the faintest smell of a winter rose – but they are quite real, and purposeful.

I've never had an experience of the Spirit like Isaiah's, that predicted the coming Messiah or dramatically altered the course of an entire nation. Yet I've had more than one experience that has dramatically altered the course of my own life and that of others.

So my advice is, the the next time you smell a "rose" when everything before you looks like a pile of dung, go with the rose – in winter or summer.