

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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December 2012 - Volume 20, Number 12

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### How to Use Our Five Senses to Experience the Wonder of Advent

Advent is a season of the senses. Scents of pine, bayberry, and Christmas cookies ready to taste fill the air. Everywhere you go, carols waft to your ears. The feel of wrapping paper and sticky tape touch our fingers. We “ooh” at the sight of outdoor lighting displays or behold the beauty of a simply decorated tree. This is also true in our church buildings and services—though many times we don’t recognize the senses for the spiritually teachable moments that they hold. Advent can be a time to help worshipers be present to life and to God in new ways. We all desire authentic spiritual experiences with God, but the trouble is that most of our teaching comes by way of sermons, books, Bible studies, and other spiritual resources. These all instruct our *thinking* but often miss our *souls*, the prime place of divine encounter.

#### Using the Whole Brain to Experience God

Advent gives us an opportunity to engage both sides of our brain, with all five senses and our bodies, to more fully experience God. When we’re fully present—body, mind, and soul—we learn how to cultivate an experiential faith that is attentive to a self-disclosing God.

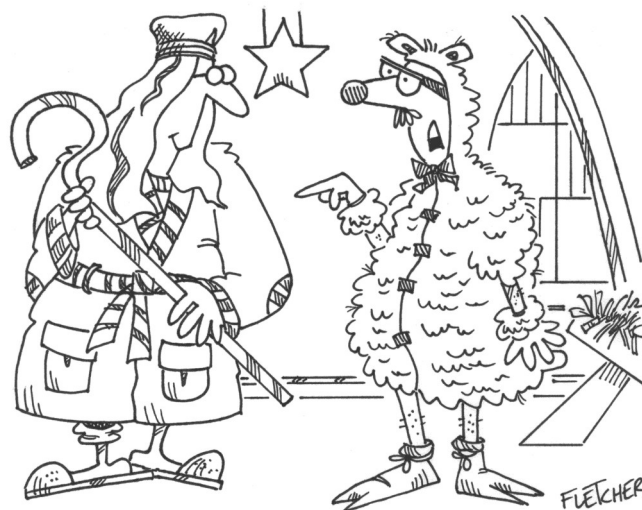
**The role of the left brain.** Words are the primary form of communication that we use to nurture our spiritual lives. Words are the language of the left brain, which is the logical and concrete center of our thinking that uses words to understand and interpret experiences. However, the left brain cannot experience God or anything else. The right brain does the *experiencing*. The left brain then takes *meaning* from the experiences processed by our right brain. Planning Advent worship experiences that involve the whole brain helps make faith more than an intellectual exercise for your congregants.

**The role of the right brain.** This creative and intuitive center of our brain communicates through images, not words. Images are anything that you en-

vision through one or more of your senses. For instance, when you *smell* the scent of pine and think “Hanging of the Greens,” you have just utilized your right brain through your sense of smell. When you listen to “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing” and it brings to mind the image of heavenly choirs, you have *heard* the sound and processed it using the right side of your brain.

Because the right brain does our experiencing, sensory spiritual practices that involve the right brain open us to a heightened perception and experience of God. Such exercises position our heart for divine encounter. However, we need both sides of our brain in order to live and grow as a person of faith. In fact, neither side can do its job well without the other.

**The role of all five senses.** Since our lives are led mostly through the act of thinking, we often become divorced from our souls and bodies. Using our senses helps us to live in the present. This is important because the present is the only place that we can fully experience God. Advent is a wonderful time to



FOR THE LAST TIME, HAROLD...  
ENGAGING MY PHYSICAL SENSES IN WORSHIP  
DURING ADVENT DOES NOT INCLUDE  
BEING POKED BY A SHEPHERD'S STAFF!

practice using our senses so that we can experience God in the reality of the present moment.

Scripture is filled with dozens of references to the physical senses. Many are familiar, such as Psalm 34:8: “O *taste* and *see* that the Lord is good” (KJV). And there is Matthew 5:8, “Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall *see* God” (KJV). These passages provide reminders about the importance of the often-forgotten art of linking senses to spirituality.

It is not difficult for us to recognize the pure, God-given sensory experiences of seeing a dramatic waterfall or smelling the delicate scent of a newborn child for the gifts that they are. Yet, we rarely think about our sensory experiences as windows into the life of the Spirit that can lead us to opportunities of experiencing God in fresh ways.

**The body.** Some faith traditions model how to involve the body in worship and prayer as a way to express one’s heart. And undeniably, when we involve our bodies in kinesthetic response, we reinforce what we are feeling, thinking, and doing. The actions involved in kneeling for prayer, lighting the Advent candle, singing carols, or walking to the altar for Christmas Eve communion strengthen our internal attitudes through outward expression.

Too often, however, we live mostly in our thoughts—making lists and checking them twice—and spend too little time listening to what our bodies are saying. Yet Christians throughout history have known that our bodies have much to teach us. During Advent, worshipers utilize not only their senses, but also their *bodies* to form a closer relationship with God.

### Enhancing Worship through the Senses

Below are just a few ways that you can use sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touch to help your congregation go deeper into their lives with God.

- Give every worshiper a piece of swaddling cloth. During the service, read the passage containing Luke 2:7 and encourage them to feel, smell, and listen to the cloth as they fold and unfold it.
- If you offer communion during Advent, before inviting congregants to participate ask them to prepare their bodies as well as their souls for the experience. Encourage them to take time to no-

tice the tastes, textures, and scents involved in the experience of receiving communion.

- Set up a crèche at the entrance to your sanctuary. Place sticky-pads and pencils there. Invite congregants to pause there before entering for worship and imagine themselves in that scene. What do they smell? Taste? Feel? See? Hear? Have them take a sticky-note, write a word or two about it, and stick it on the wall around the crèche.

Beyond these options, take some time to think of the ways that your church traditionally celebrates Advent: lighting an Advent candle, hanging an Advent wreath, performing a Christmas cantata, presenting a Christmas play, or having a candlelight worship service. Which of them could you use to involve the physical senses and help link the right and left brain? Are there fresh ways to utilize your congregation’s Advent celebration to engage your members’ senses, bodies, and (entire) brains?

### The Bottom Line

When we combine our whole brains and bodies in attention and love, we move to a new level of noticing. We get a deep, clear look at God everywhere around us. Encourage your congregation to slow their breathing, quiet their minds, and calm their hearts during this busy season. Then invite them to take a fresh look with attention *and* love.

Ask them to involve themselves in self-reflection as they consider:

- What do I see?
- What do I smell?
- What do I hear?
- What do I taste?
- What do I feel?
- When did I catch a glimpse, whiff, touch, taste, or sound of the Divine?

By inviting them to engage their senses in ways like this, you will help awaken them to the wonder of God all around them—a joyous, sensuous, spiritual awakening at Advent!

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This article was adapted from *Awaken Your Senses: Exercises for Exploring the Wonder of God* (IVP, 2012) by J. Brent Bill and Beth A. Booram.

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