



BREATH MOST FOUL

At first we thought there was a grass fire at the small farm down in the valley. Energetic clouds of dense white smoke billowed up from an area near the dilapidated house, amidst the ubiquitous junked cars and pickup trucks, field machines, and general trash of a low-end rural establishment. From the T-intersection where we could turn either left or right to reach Winterset for our daily visit with Mom at the nursing home, the smoke blanketed the area on the opposite side of the weedy pond and the two horses that lived on its perimeter. Through the smoke we noticed the flashing lights of the local volunteer fire department, so we turned left to avoid the area.

An hour later we chose the return route that would take us directly past the farm. The firefighters were still there, but the amount of smoke had been reduced. Now we could see that it was not a grass fire at all, but the farmer's stored hay that had somehow ignited. Even though the firefighters were still pouring water onto each of the huge, round bales, they still smoldered, filling the area around the farm with their acrid stink.

By the next evening, twenty-four hours later, the individual bales had been separated and spread out across the farmer's pasture land—where they continued to smolder, with some already reduced to piles of gray ash.

Rising this morning to a beautiful autumn day, I threw wide the windows to inhale the fresh cool air. From the west porch I looked down on the valley, and noticed, still, the white pall of smoke cloaking the low farm and drifting slowly off to the south east. Then I realized that the air outside our own windows was not at all fresh and clean, but seasoned invisibly by the persistent, clinging stench from the smoldering hay bales. The acrid aroma not only blanketed the valley, but was rising, unseen, into the surrounding hills.

A Factory Smell

For twenty years Linda and I lived in San Diego, California. In turn we lived in a rustic suburb to the south, in the city proper, and in a newer suburb to the north. During those two decades the city evolved from a mid-sized navy/resort town to a claustrophobic, traffic-jammed city. What had once felt like a modest collection of neighborhoods was now an over-populated metropolis.

In all that time we were aware that there was smog in the city, but we rarely noticed it. On some days you could see the brownish gunk moving down the coast from Los Angeles, but otherwise it was ignored, and the air seemed perfectly normal.

After living only a few years in the countryside of the Midwest, however, suddenly the air in San Diego was more palpable. Returning to the city for a family wedding, we immediately noticed not only the oppressive traffic, but the stink of the air. Even in the city's beautiful greensward and wood, Balboa Park, to us the air bore a distinct factory smell. Our friend with us—a resident—did not notice the smell at all.

An Ill Wind

All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.

(Hebrews 11:13-16)

There is an acrid stink in the air. It cannot be seen. People who remain residents of this world rarely smell it. They hear tales about it; they perhaps catch its fleeting, vaporous shadow in their peripheral vision. But for the most part they go about their lives blithely unaware of the putrid smog that envelops them.

There are others who dwell on this world, but are not of it. They are just visiting, passing through on their way home to a better country. These individuals once were residents; they too were happily ignorant of the stink. But one day a new wind came upon them, and from then on they were equipped to know that there was something better—a place where the air was clean and fresh.

Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."

(John 3:5-6)

An ill wind blows about us—the invisible, yet powerful breath of this world. In humans, the stench of bad breath is often the result of what we have recently eaten, the fetid percolation of something foul lying in the belly. Likewise, at the moment this world has in its belly one who has been left in charge—a foul, bile-eating liar by the name of Satan.

And he led [Jesus] up and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said to Him, "I will give You all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish."

(Luke 4:5-6)

His breath is indeed most foul, but those aligned with him—those *not* following Christ—cannot smell it, for they have been living with it too long. It permeates their sinuses, their clothing, their very pores. In fact, they not only are oblivious to Satan's stench, they have adopted it as their own. His lies have become their own; his anger at anything righteous and good has become their own voice; his love of everything base and debasing, everything putrid and obscene has become their own love. His fetid breath is now exhaled through them.

And to them it smells sweet.

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

(2 Corinthians 4:3-4)

The Sweet Breath of the Spirit

The followers of Christ bear the burden of recognizing the stink of their temporary environment, but they have the hope—the promise—that there is something better. Believers, even now, know the unbridled joy of living without the smog, of living where the air is fresh and uncontaminated. They have been given the companionship of the freshest wind there is, the Holy Spirit, and His sweet breath has the ability to filter out the invisible stink of the soil and flesh.

But believers also look forward to the day when they will dwell in their true home—the home they will share with Christ and the Father. There the Spirit will no longer need to filter the air they breathe, for it will have the purity of God's throne room, drenched in His righteousness, holiness, and joy. In the believers' true home they will no longer struggle against the permeating, cloying stench of deceit, depravity, and anger that marked their first home. Here they will live in the perpetual springtime of God's love, and the fresh, sweet breath of His Spirit. dsl

*How tedious and tasteless the hours
When Jesus no longer I see!
Sweet prospects, sweet birds, and sweet flowers,
Have all lost their sweetness to me—
The midsummer sun shines but dim,
The fields strive in vain to look gay;
But when I am happy in Him,
December's as pleasant as May.*

*His Name yields the richest perfume,
And sweeter than music His voice;
His presence disperses my gloom,
And makes all within me rejoice;
I should, were He always thus nigh,
Have nothing to wish or to fear;
No mortal so happy as I,
My summer would last all the year.*

*Content with beholding His face,
My all to His pleasure resign'd,
No changes of season or place
Would make any change in my mind:
While blest with a sense of His love,
A palace a toy would appear;
And prisons would palaces prove,
If Jesus would dwell with me there.*

*My Lord, if indeed I am Thine,
If Thou art my sun and my song,
Say, why do I languish and pine?
And why are my winters so long?
O drive these dark clouds from my sky;
Thy soul-cheering presence restore;
Or take me to Thee up on high,
Where winter and clouds are no more.*
(John Newton)