

chapter four

TRACI BLACKMON

*The Lord is my Shepherd. I have everything I need.
Psalm 23:1*

For people of faith, how one sees God is critical to understanding how one sees self.

I was taught early that God is male. And I learned to love this God before I knew God is also white. This socialization happened through a host of overt and covert mainstream messages.

My formative years were filled with affirmations of God's maleness. The way our prayers were addressed to "our Father;" not just the special one that Jesus prayed, but even the ones we made for ourselves. The fact that all the key positions in the Bible and in church were held by men.

Men preached the sermons and men served communion. Men performed the baptisms and men counted the money. Only men sat in the pulpit and men made the big decisions. In hindsight, I have known I was to preach since I was 16 years old, but my reality offered no linguistic context for such a call until later in life.

My discovery of God's whiteness was more deductive than instructive. There were no images of God in my

home or at my maternal grandparents' house where I spent most of my days, or at Lily Grove Baptist Church where my paternal grandfather served as pastor, or at Emmanuel Church of God in Christ, my grandmother's church where I felt God in the rhythmic beat of the praise.

I knew God danced.

I knew God listened.

I knew God spoke.

I knew God loved me.

And I knew God was male.

But God's whiteness was deduced from Sunday school books, and *The Ten Commandments* with Charlton Heston as Moses, and the statues of Mary that adorned every Catholic home in my neighborhood. Then there were the stained glass windows. Stained glass was common in the church of my youth, and either the glass depicted no image, or a cross, or a white Jesus. One popular reproduction was Jesus sitting on a rock surrounded by children: all white children, sitting with an Afro-Semitic Palestinian who is falsely portrayed as white. It's easy to miss

such an irony if one sees oneself included. Not out of any maliciousness, but simply, inclusion calms our fears.

I am reminded of when I took my 6-year-old daughter, Kortni, to interview for first grade at a Lutheran school in our neighborhood. Kortni attended daycare and kindergarten in a black faith-based school. I don't remember any images of Jesus in that school, but they learned about Jesus from teachers and workers who looked like them.

By the time Kortni was 6, she could recite a Bible verse for every letter in the alphabet. So when we arrived at the Lutheran school and I saw this huge mural of Jesus surrounded by children and one of the children was black, I was ecstatic a black child was included. I knew this would be the perfect place for Kortni. After the interview, the teacher asked Kortni if she had any questions and Kortni responded, "I have one."

"Why do you think Jesus is white?"

Neither the teacher nor I understood right away, and then Kortni reminded us of the mural. She did not mention the little black girl holding Jesus' hand. She wanted to know why this school did not think Jesus looked like her. The teacher responded that we do not know exactly what Jesus looks like, so many artists paint Jesus to look like themselves. This is true in some places, but in many places where black children worship and play, it is not.

In 2009 I travelled to Ghana, where I found everything black, except Jesus. Recently, I had the

same experience in Egypt. I asked a minister from our hosting congregation in Ghana why there were so many images of white Jesus in their sanctuaries. He cautioned me not to look at Ghana through American eyes. "The word 'white' means something different in places with a history of racial oppression and marginalization. For Ghanaians, white is just a color," he said. It has been a long time since white was just a color.

The minister's explanation dismisses the psychological impact of Ghana's colonization just as our dismissal of this white Jesus phenomenon as inconsequential dismisses its psychological impact. Although most cultures display deities as recognizable reflections of themselves, black people, both in America and across the diaspora, have been slow to depict ourselves in the image of God.

If the possibility of those sacred images changing is uncomfortable for you, or difficult for you to imagine, I ask you to lean in to that feeling and ask yourself why.

What does it mean to love this white God in my black skin?

It is the social construct of whiteness as normative that allows us to ignore a narrative of scripture that clearly negates the imaginings of the Christ that adorn so many of our sanctuaries and fill so much of our Christian literature. If the possibility of those sacred images changing is uncomfortable for you, or difficult for you to imagine, I ask you to lean in to that feeling and ask yourself why.



I was in high school before I saw a depiction of a black Jesus. I was in a church whose congregation was predominantly white and I remember walking in and seeing this huge crucifix behind the altar with a black crucified Christ.

I was in high school before I saw a depiction of a black Jesus.

I was strangely uncomfortable in its presence.

I do not remember why I was there. I do not remember what happened while I was there. I only remember that Jesus. Until that moment, I had not thought consciously about the color of God.

It is fascinating the things we notice, and the things we dismiss, when we are immersed in environments that celebrate our being and normalize our experiences.

He leads me beside the still water for his name's sake ...

By the time I entered kindergarten, I was reading, and by third grade I had become the teacher's helper for some children who lagged behind. At that point, Mrs. Hill, my former kindergarten teacher who was also my next-door neighbor, recommended that my parents transfer me to a more academically challenging school on the "other side of town."

My mother did not walk me into my new school. She dropped me off at the carpool, and I found my way to my class through a sea of strange students and overly

friendly teachers, only to discover no one in my class looked like me. No one.

This was the beginning of a very long trajectory of appreciation of two worlds. I would not share any formal class with any other person of color until college, and Mrs. Sturdivent, my third grade teacher at my old school, would be my last black teacher until seminary.

On the very first day of fourth grade in my brand new school, my brand new classmate, Michael, called me a "nigger."

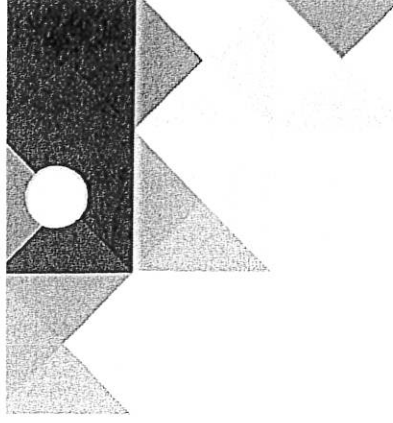
I had never been called that before, and I wasn't quite sure what it really meant, but I knew that it was something awful and disgusting because of the way he spewed that word from his mouth.

"You're a nigger," he said loudly enough for the entire class to hear.

My mind raced to search for a response and I reached for the only word I could find.

"Well, you're a peckerwood!" I exclaimed, a word I'd heard my father use under his breath when some white person made him angry. But somehow today this word just didn't seem to hold the same force as the one Michael used.

Imagine my surprise in my first chapel service at school when I learned that Michael's father was the school's minister.



I never told Michael's father, or mine, about the name calling, and eventually Michael stopped. Yet every Wednesday morning as we entered chapel, I wondered whether Michael had learned "nigger" from his father just as I learned "peckerwood" from mine.

Yea, though I walk through the valley . . .

Fourth grade was my first experience with a room filled with white people, and for some of my classmates it was their first experience with a black girl.

*There is church. And then
there is black church.
There is American cuisine.
And then there is soul
food.*

The first weeks were filled with questions about my blackness. Can I touch your hair? Why is your skin dark? What color is your blood? Kim became my best friend at school, and she never asked me questions about being black. I am still fascinated by such questions and the assumptions they reveal.

The questions are less frequent now, but they have not stopped. Questions about my hair, or my food, or my neighborhood, or my church. Requests from confirmation classes to attend worship during their

week of mission so that children can have an "urban experience."

I often surprise myself with my capitulation to such "exoticism." Exoticism in this context is my acquiescing to white culture as normative, thereby making it necessary to subtly and often unconsciously define my actions, my being, and even my worship as an exception to the norm.

I can hear you asking, "Then what should we do?" The answer is: I do not know. It will take all of us working together to discover ways of being that defy our learned behavior.

What I do know is our present way of being is not a sharing of cultures, but rather an explanation of one culture as seen through the lens of another.

There is church. And then there is black church. There is American cuisine. And then there is soul food.

There is history. And then there is black history.

There are neighborhoods. And then there is urban mission. There is Jesus...and then there is black Jesus.

One of the unnamed benefits of white privilege is the absence of any need to explain whiteness.

I will fear no evil . . .

My dream school was Harvard. My entire class, there were only 32 of us, visited the campus during our

sophomore college tour and I fell in love. I knew that it would be difficult to get in, but I believed I had a chance.

I was excited when a Harvard recruiter visited our school campus in my junior year. It was another opportunity to hear about the program and the requirements, and also an opportunity to make myself known to the recruiter.

The recruiter reminded us once again what an honor it would be to attend Harvard. He also reminded us that Harvard receives enough applications each year to fill its freshmen class with 4.0 students, and warned us that if our grades and extracurricular activities were lacking not to get our hopes up for Harvard.

I was not a 4.0 student, but I had a solid 3.6, good SAT scores, and a huge amount of extracurricular activities, including the state oratorical championship, local winner of the French oratorical contest, debate team, thespian with lead roles in plays, summer scholar with college credits, and community theatre, on top of working a part-time job.

After the presentation, I was excited to share my accomplishments and see whether the recruiter agreed Harvard was worth a shot. But before I could tell him my story, he said to me, "If you can just graduate with a 2.5, you can get into Harvard."

I was the exotic.

My hard work didn't matter. It didn't matter that I actually qualified for Harvard on my merit.

Another consequence of white privilege is the normalization of the soft bigotry of low expectations of entire groups of people.

I attended one of the highest ranked high schools in our state. I was fully engaged, sometimes at great cost to myself. I not only did well, I excelled in some areas. But assimilation does not eradicate assumptions.

I wonder how often this has really been the context of affirmative action interventions. Not to accommodate the less qualified, but rather, to counteract the less aware.

I did not apply to Harvard.

You prepare a table before me . . .

I do not share these memories to generate pity or guilt. Everyone has a story. We are all made in the image of God, yet we are also molded by our experiences and our encounters with one another.

My experiences have prepared me to walk in the world as a black woman who preaches. My relationships challenge me to often wrestle with deep love and deep despair simultaneously. It is a journey of self-discovery, deep awareness of the other, and new understandings of God.

I have decided to pack lightly.

Reflection Questions and Discussion Topics

Choose a listening partner. Each partner will be given 3 minutes to reflect on the following questions:

1. *What is your first recollection of your whiteness?*
2. *What images of God do you recall from childhood?*
3. *How has your whiteness helped to shape who you are today?*

The purpose of a listening partner is to give their partner all of their attention, without commenting in any way on what is being said. Simply listen. When it is the other partner's turn to speak, the one speaking is to tell only their story. Commentary on what one hears is not allowed.