

Columbia, Missouri
The Worship of God • October 3, 2021



The Scripture
Revelation 7:9-17

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

The Message
“Jesus, for Real: Color-full”
Mark Briley

Jesus, *for real*. That’s what we’re after, right? Who is the real Jesus, and how does that authentic reality show up in our lives today and guide our ministry forward as a church?

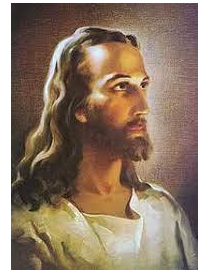
We've been asking these questions during this sermon series that is built around our recently released Priority Action Plan or PAP as a church. Six new Action Teams are launching this month. They are not taking the place of our many ministries we are passionate about and committed to right now – from children's and youth ministries, to worship, to service, care, and seniors' ministries – all still the heartbeat of who we are at Broadway. But these new teams are expanding the edges – pressing us to bloom as a congregation where we are planted at this time, in this season as a church.

I was part of leading a virtual retreat this past week with the Bethany Fellows – a gathering of young Disciples ministers from across the nation. One of the facilitators, at one point, used the phrase, "*in the before times...*" and I was so struck by those four words. It was like speaking of a foreign time way back when... in the year of our Lord two-thousand-and -nineteen: "*In the before times.*" But we knew exactly what she meant. It's a new world now. Who is Jesus, for real, in this time? That's what we're after. And today? We're looking at Broadway's *Action Team #1: Grow a Multi-Racial/Multi-Ethnic Congregation*. Why grow a color-full church? Why would that be a real Jesus-y thing to do? And isn't diversity just a buzz word these days? Ah... hold tight... we'll get to that. But first... the real Jesus.

Do you have a picture in your mind of what Jesus' human body looked like? You probably do. No one's image has been painted or presented more than his. You may picture some image from your childhood church – maybe



Solomon's famous depiction; maybe a picture of Jesus playing soccer with kids from around the world while wearing a white flowing robe. Maybe you have a picture of Jesus body on a cross or some abstract depiction of Jesus on a white horse like a unicorn with lasers coming out of his eyes. What do you see?



Jesus never took a selfie and posted it on social media; not even a Polaroid picture that he popped out of a camera and shook like the dickens until his image became clear. Truth is... we don't know what Jesus looked like for sure, but we do know he was a Palestinian-Jewish man living in Galilee in the first century.



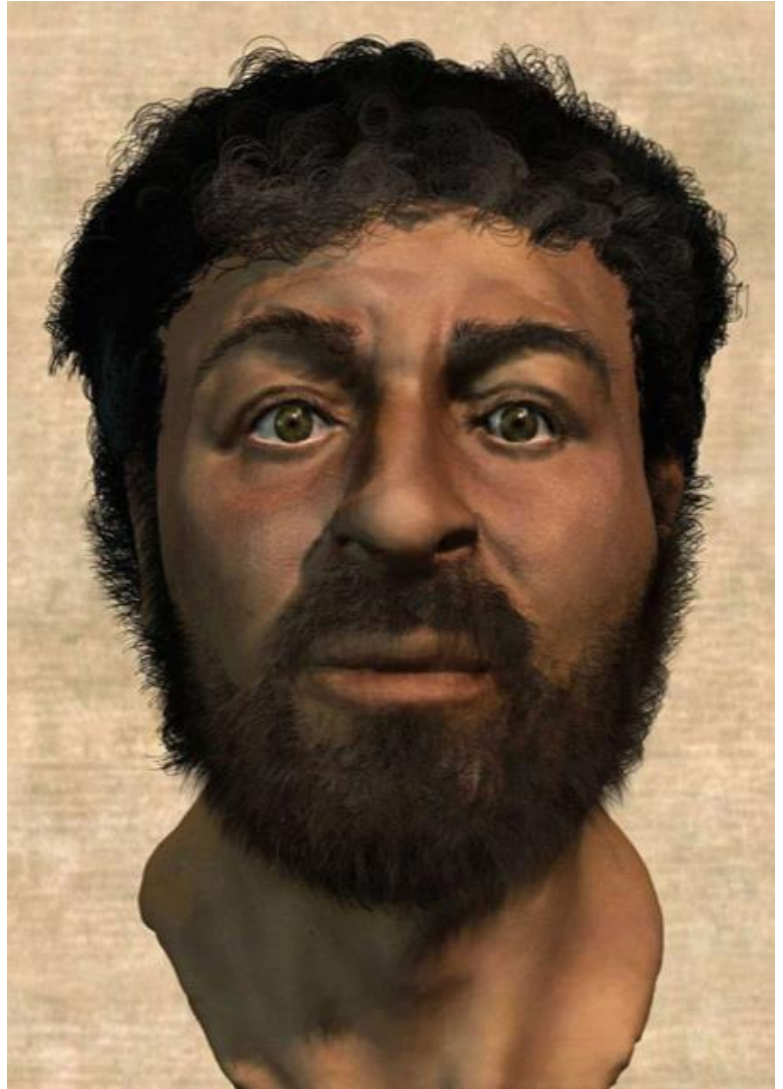
So, it is fair to say he would have looked like a Jewish Galilean. Given today's technology, British forensic experts and Israeli archaeologists have collaborated to develop a computer model of Jesus' face based on forensic anthropology.¹ Medical artist Dr. Richard Neave led the charge, and the team of scientists suggesting Jesus might have had a wide face with dark eyes, short dark hair, a bushy beard, and tanned

¹ <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/jesus-face-forensic-anthropology-art-392823>

skin. Did he shave the beard and let the 'stache grow for *No Shave November*? We don't know. Utilizing three ancient Semite skulls and features historically common to that time reveal Jesus was likely not more than 5'5" tall... maybe shorter. Likely only weighed 115-120 lbs. There goes your Travis Kelce-sized image of your Messiah. Probably smaller than Spud Webb! After every calculation was tabulated, the result of what they deem to be the image most like Jesus, *for real*, is this...

Just sit with that. Jesus had a real human body of a given time and era and that shaped who he was just like our bodies shape who we are, too.

Another of our retreat presenters this past week was Rev. Nannette Banks, who serves at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago; she's also a friend and colleague with whom I've had the pleasure to serve on the Bethany Fellows leadership team. Her current doctoral work is entitled, "*Prophetic Presiding*" – a fitting topic on this World Communion Sunday. She told a story about becoming aware of her own body in a new way as she became aware of Jesus' body in a new way at the Table. Hot in the news at the time was the unjust killing of a black woman that was pressing Nannette's spirit in a heavy way at the time. "*Could that be me?*" she wondered. "*Could that be my black body?*" And then at the Table, those words we hear every week as Jesus says, "*This is my body.*" ("*Full stop!*" she said aloud. Right there!).



The quote we share found in Jesus' words of institution go on, but she had a hard stop right there as Jesus said, "*This is **my** body.*" And she claimed her own in a new way, "*This is **my** body.*" She had never leaned in all the way as she did in that moment. We are spirit beings, but this flesh is ours, too. We live in these skins – and such skin has been used to divide and harm one another for far too long.



Amanda Gorman – 23 years young; first person to be named National Youth Poet Laureate in American history, wrote a poem about her own body a few years ago. It is called “Ode to *Girls of Color*” and it reads like this:

At the age of 5

*I saw how we always pick the flower swelling with the most color.
The color distinguishes it from the rest, and tells us:
This flower should not be left behind.
But this does not happen in the case of colored girls.
Our color makes hands pull back, and we, left to grow alone,
stretching our petals to a dry sun.*

At the age of 12

*I blinked in the majesty of the color within myself,
blinded by the knowledge that a skinny black girl, a young brown teen,
has the power to light Los Angeles all night,
the radiance to heal all the scars left on this city’s pavement.
Why had this realization taken so long,
When color pulses in all that is beauty and painting and human?
You see, long ago, they told me
that snakes and spiders have spots and vibrant bodies if they are poisonous.
In other words, being of color meant danger, warning, ‘do not touch’.*

At the age of 18

*I know my color is not warning, but a welcome.
A girl of color is a lighthouse, an ultraviolet ray of power, potential, and promise
My color does not mean caution, it means courage
my dark does not mean danger, it means daring,
my brown does not mean broken, it means bold backbone from working
twice as hard to get half as far.
Being a girl of color means I am key, path, and wonder all in one body.*

At the age of 18

*I am experiencing how black and brown can glow.
And glow I will, glow we will, vibrantly, colorfully;
not as a warning, but as promise,
that we will set the sky alight with our magic.²*

² How to Love the World: Poems of Gratitude and Hope. Edited by James Crews. Pg. 8-9. Storey Publishing. 2021.

This is *her* experience in *her* body... and it matters to God... and it matters to us. I loved a few weeks ago when our director of community engagement, Adonica Coleman, was in the pulpit. Seeing Adonica's name in the worship guide, a Broadway mother of a beautiful daughter of color beamed ear to ear and said, "*I'm so excited Adonica is preaching today!*" She said something gracious about "*Don't get me wrong, I like to hear you preach, too...*" and we laughed. "*But for my girl to see a woman that looks like her in our church's pulpit?*"

And we had a moment, you know? To see a "*body like mine*" makes us more like the kingdom of God on earth. We are a color-full people, friends. And our DNA at Broadway has always been built on tearing down barriers. In the early 1960s, when racial tensions were high and oppressive, Broadway was the first congregation in Columbia to come out publicly and say, "*Your body, no body, is not a barrier here.*" And coming out of our visioning process at Broadway – we discerned that God is calling us to uniquely embody this gift in our present and growing forward into our future in an expansive way.

Now, we don't imagine growing a color-full church for diversity's sake. Diversity is not the end-goal of Jesus in the kingdom of God. It's not just to get different kinds of people in the room together, which is not at all bad, of course. A friend shared a quote this week that said, "*Being around is no guarantee something relationally significant will happen, but **not** being around will absolutely guarantee something relationally significant will **not** happen.*"

Proximity matters, yes... but if that's as far as we go, that only tends to be useful for pictures on websites and marketing materials that say, "*Look at us – we're diverse!*" It's more of the bring-your-color-but-not-your-culture sentiment. But, as New York City pastor Rich Villodas notes, the church is more than a sanctified subway car. We're not simply called to be the Four Train in Manhattan where there are lots of different people on the train, but their lives aren't really touched by each other.³ No. The Church is called to be a new family. In Genesis 12, we engage Abraham. The core of Abe's Call was to be a blessing to the nations, so we'd all come together and worship God. We can't understand the Bible until we see that God isn't just about saving souls but rather creating a new kind of family. Broadway, we have a vision for this.

I mentioned Rich Villodas earlier. He pastors a multi-cultural congregation in New York City. Their people represent some 75 nations around the world. He notes that such a vision has some challenges as we're always battling our biases or "*isms*" that fight against this vision of the new family of Jesus – classism; racism, ethnocentrism among

³ Rich Villodas is pastor of New Life Fellowship in Queens, NY. He is an author, speaker and writer as well. <https://www.richvillodas.com/>. This sermon is indebted to Villodas' exegetical and sermonic work on this passage and sentiments therein.

them. One of the ways we identify the *isms* we're shaped by is to ask ourselves the question: "*Who do we feel uncomfortable with our children or our siblings, marrying?*" Is your comfort based on where someone comes from? Their family of origin? Their looks? Their economic status? Where is your discomfort? One professor said, the question is not, "*Can I be your brother in Christ.*" The real question is, "*Can I be your brother-in-law?*"

I ask this not as judgment but simply our own self-awareness and understanding. You don't have to say a thing out loud right now. I just want you to answer those questions for yourself, right now in your heart. Being biased isn't the problem; we all have biases. Leaving them unidentified is a problem. These questions reveal in us the potential barriers that we erect as a way of keeping us disconnected from becoming the new family of Jesus.

We get to our text for today from Revelation. Now, Revelation is the most misunderstood book of the Bible. Over time, some Christians have seen it as a handbook about the way the world is going to crash and burn before it ends. It has almost become cliché. We hit a rough patch as a society, we don't understand something, and before you know it, someone says, "*End times, yo.*" But choosing dates and calling presidents the anti-Christ, and conspiracy theories have not proven helpful in the Christian quest to imagine earth as it is in heaven.

The word Revelation simply means "*unveiling*" – the unveiling of what has previously been hidden. It's not something to be feared or to make unhealthy connections about the end of the world, which we've been wrong about every single time so far.

This work is just an unveiling, a peek behind the curtains of how, perhaps, God in Christ may heal the world. The revelation is not just about the future but is intended to form us in the present. Our challenge? – to live now what we anticipate in the fully-revealed kingdom of God. We live as those, who believe God can break down barriers today because of where we're going. We become the movie trailer of things yet to come. We demonstrate in Columbia, Missouri, that we're expanding our family in colorful ways. How beautiful!

So, Revelation chapter seven rolls up, parts the curtains, and invites us to live into this story. What we see is breathtaking – this picture of the throne and who surrounds it. At the throne – there is no separation of social status, color, ethnicity, and economics – it's a picture of a united and full eternal reality. In this vision, our color is seen, our ethnicity is celebrated.

You'll hear people say sometimes, "*I don't see color,*" or "*I'm colorblind,*" as if to say, color doesn't matter. But this speaks against this notion. The Revelation says several

times, “*I see,*” “*I saw,*” “*I see people of every tribe.*” It’s not about an aesthetic diversity – it’s a common and unified engagement where everyone comes into close proximity to God. This is an image of the new family in Christ. To become this family, to become the new family incarnate – in the flesh – in the now, we’ve got to work at it intentionally.

Rich Villodas points to God’s incarnation in Jesus as the practice to initiate in becoming a color-full people of faith. What did that incarnation require? God had to leave one world, enter a new world, and allow God’s very self to be formed by that particular world – the Ancient Middle East culture as it was for this 8 lbs., 6 oz. tiny, infant, baby Jesus.

And as I shared last week about Jesus from the block... God’s very being took on this life to know and understand; to love and shape; to experience firsthand what it would take to draw all people into Love – the very nature of God. The vision of this new family of Christ, then, is to become an incarnational people, too. It’s so comfortable to stay in our world – keep it right here – that easy dance zone right where you are – with others who dance like us, look like us, dress like us, vote like us; but if we’re going to be the *new family* of Jesus – we must be open to leaving the comfort of our world. If not, we’re not going very far. And so? We listen. We get our feet under the same table. We enter a new world with an openness to what we’ll discover, how it can form us even as we bring our own bodies, who we are into such a space, bringing our own formative presence as well.

This is how we grow as people of faith. This is how we grow as people, period. It’s not to pretend bias doesn’t exist, or color doesn’t exist, or culture doesn’t exist. It’s why we have multiple styles of worship and why we’re drawn to particular studies and experiences. But... we grow together as we name our own biases and seek to experience something new.

I was having this very conversation with a man of color I love and respect. And in the midst of this conversation about how the church can be real in this time beyond the “*before times*” – he said, “*We’ve got to have each other – the real us – if we really want to grow. We can’t be afraid to offend or shy away from asking questions because that’s the only way we learn.*”

It’s not that we offend on purpose but in our openness to the new family. We try. In trying, we’ll not always get it right. He said, “*I just want to be real with you, and I want you to be real with me... and as we mess up as we’re growing, we can simply acknowledge, “Hey, we’re growing here.”*

It reminded me of a word I’ve passed along to you before. “*Being offended is inevitable. Living offended is a choice.*” Let’s build this new family of Christ – made in

the image of the real Jesus – not just *his* body, and *our* bodies, but in Spirit that more than brings bodies together but says, “*Come... be family with us. Build family with us.*”

If we can do this, become this vision of family, our city will say, “*Who are these people?*” and others will say like we find in Revelation, “*Oh... they are the ones who came out of the before-times, through the great ordeal, and do you hear what they say about themselves? They say, “We are becoming the new family of Christ... right now.”* And we’ll say, “*We are, and we’d love to welcome you, too.*”

Song of Focus **“Jesus Loves Me!”**

WORDS: ST. 1, ANNA B. WARNER, 1860; ADDITIONS IN PUBLIC DOMAIN
MUSIC: WILLIAM B. BRADBURY, 1962; ARR. MICHAEL TATUM

1. Jesus loves me! This I know,
for the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to him belong;
they are weak, but he is strong.

Refrain:

Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me!
Yes, Jesus loves me! The Bible tells me so.

2. Jesus loves me! This I know,
as he loved me long ago,
taking children on his knee,
saying, “Let them come to me.”
3. Jesus loves me still today,
walking with me on my way,
wanting as a friend to give
light and love to all who live.

BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH