

Urban Legends:
God is a White, Blue-Eyed, Blonde-Hair American Man
Patrick and Josh

An author, whose name I've long forgotten, once wrote, "In the beginning, God created us in his image. Humans have been returning the favor ever since." Or, to put it another way: "Do you know the difference between me and God? God doesn't wake up in the morning thinking he's Josh Graves."¹

The most intriguing element of our story as Christians is the story of Incarnation—that God became a part of his own story. In my freshmen spirituality class, I use the analogy of Shakespeare becoming a character in his own play. The very thought is inconceivable, beyond our ability to grasp or appreciate. God took on flesh, eyes, hands, stomach aches, toes, headaches, fatigue, hunger, side and facial cramps from laughing at one of Peter's blunders.

"What did Jesus look like?" Inevitably, we all wonder that this. I mean, after all, Jesus wasn't from Rochester Hills so he doesn't look like the people I run with.

Was Jesus the African Jesus depicted in this portrait?



I remember reading a comprehensive study from the late 1960's about minorities' depictions of God. Specifically, of reading that African American children in this country overwhelmingly painted God and Jesus as White Men when asked "What does God look like?" That is a tragedy if you ask me. Not because God was white in their picture, but because it was the first gut-level response.

Notice, he still has the Jesus-sash in this photo. I like that his hands are extended. This portrait captures the inviting nature of Jesus. He never forced himself on anyone. "Come and see." "My yoke is easy, my burden is light." "Come, follow me." "Your faith has saved you." Jesus responds to people as much as initiates.

This photo is an "African liberation" Jesus. It's a bit more political. A portrait for those who've lived in poverty and oppression.

¹Based on a line from John York.



Is that what Jesus looked like? Did he have a goatee? Was he dark skinned? We know that the man who would carry the Cross of Christ was from Cyrene—most scholars believe Cyrene to be from northern African, specifically, Egypt.

Asian artists have drawn Jesus in their image as well. Here's a close-up shot of Asian Jesus.



It is strange to think about it isn't it. All of these cultures depicting Jesus in their own likeness—who do they think they are?

One Mexican artist had the idea to paint Jesus. This is what they came up with.



Before we stand in judgment toward varying ethnic groups, I should remind you that many white churches have created a Jesus “in their own image.” Here’s a copy of one of the more popular Jesus images.



1. Can we talk about Christmas? Have you ever entered a mall and seen Santa there in the middle, a line of kids snaking back past the stall with the knock-off sunglasses? What was your reaction when you saw that Santa was a woman? [men are better Santas. We are used to sitting for long periods of time and making extravagant promises we have no intention of keeping]
2. We have a case we can make with Santa since he is a Nordic figure, but the problem is that we have done the same thing with Jesus: we have crafted him in our image.
3. Some of you have seen the Scandinavian Jesus on I-75 North. As you are heading out of the Clarkston area, there he is. A church has taken it upon themselves to pose a formidable question to would-be passers by: “Are you on the right road?”
4. Good question, but I just can’t get past the suburban white Jesus. Yes, it seems he’s visited a tanning bed recently but he is unmistakably white. Why?
5. As we’ve mentioned the last two weeks, Genesis 1:27 says that God made us in His image. Unfortunately, we have tried to make Him in ours ever since. [people angry over black Jesus or black Madonna]
6. The BBC had a mini-series a few years back about the life of Jesus. People howled in protest – not at any mistakes made in the writing or about how it wasn’t true to the Biblical record.

- They were angry because the actor chosen to play Jesus was short and overweight. Why does that bother us? What if Jesus was acne scarred, or had a persistent cough, or bad breath? What if he had a club foot or he had a lazy eye?
7. The Bible makes a point of mentioning how people dismissed Jesus and his apostles as soon as they heard them speak. Fact is, the Galilee accent was considered “hick” and uneducated (and uneducable). What if Jesus sounded like Jeff Foxworthy or Larry the Cable Guy? Why does that strike some here as being irreverent?
 8. People go so far to make God in their image that they claim Him for their race – despite the fact that race is a political concept, not a genetic one. (less than 0.05% difference between white and black – and often a different race is a closer donor match)
 9. Genesis 9:25 doesn’t curse Ham, the father of all darker skinned people. It curses one of his sons. The curse was on the Canaanites, not on black people, yet white people have frequently used this passage to claim that God likes them best (and, in fact, probably looks like them).
 10. Here’s an uncomfortable fact: Jesus didn’t look like most of us. His looks would make him subject to extra screening at the airport. He would look like the guy that made you nervous when he sat next to you on the plane.

Jesus has meant something different to peoples throughout history.²

- RABBI/MESSIAH—Jesus was the ultimate rabbinic/messiah figure to some Israel. The rabbi who’s teaching and life matched in each other in ways not seen before. Jews were mostly the first Christians for they believed Jesus was the Messiah they’d been waiting for. Many Jews did not believe because he did not rebuild the Temple nor overthrow Rome...but some believed because reports of an empty tomb.

²Based, in part, on Pelikan’s *Jesus Through the Centuries*, 1999.

- LORD: For others, especially in the ministry of Paul, Jesus is depicted as the “kurios” or “Lord of all.” As we’ve talked in other settings, this is an overt political statement. Only the emperor (or Caesar) could be called Lord. To say that Jesus is Lord and that at his name “all knees would bow and all tongues confess his lordship on earth and under the earth” was a direct slap-in-the-face to the authority of the emperor.
- CONQUISTADOR: During the Crusades, as European armies marched to the Middle East, they often did so with a picture of Jesus ushering them in.
- AMERICAN BUDDY JESUS: More recently, in the United States, we’ve seen a new version of Jesus which I like to call “Buddy Jesus.” This comes out of the Boomer’s generation need for more relationships as a result of the lack of relationships with their parents. For some Jesus is “my best friend” or as Lauren Winner reminded us on Wednesday, based on some current worship music, Jesus is more a “boyfriend for the girl acoustic guitar player.”

The point is that whether we realize it or not, we shape and twist Jesus physically and spiritually. And those two usually go together.

1. Political parties often claim Jesus. They will say “What would Jesus drive?” or “Who would Jesus bomb?”
2. The Republican party claims that God likes them best while the Democrats say that Jesus would be compassionate in exactly the way they are (what are the odds??).
3. Leaders in the emerging church have decided that Jesus was a Democrat and a pacifist...just like they are.
4. Young Republicans say Jesus was all about personal property and personal responsibility...just like they are.
5. Lauren Winner told us that too many Christians are modern day Marcionites and never is that more true than in the way we ignore the Old Testament tapestry that describes the character of God, exchanging it for a suburban white Jesus whose photo can be seen off Dixie Highway.

6. It is too easy to go on a hunt for the authentic Jesus and settle for a portion of His character – a new stereotype. Yes, I can see Jesus in the life of Mother Teresa, but I can also find him reflected – perhaps dimly – in the eyes of a burned out vet in Cass Park, or the policeman that just pulled me over, or in a third generation welfare mom. I can see Jesus in the eyes of people running soup kitchens and volunteering in the Peace Corps and I can also see Jesus wearing the uniform of the Marines or a New York City firefighter.

*I can see him as a nurse, a stay at home mom, and even as a minister!

7. God gave us 66 books to show us His many faceted character. When we make God in our image, we lose the big picture.

1.

8. The people of Palestine had made their Messiah into their own image before he even showed up. When Jesus arrived they were very open about the fact that, to them, he didn't measure up. Jesus didn't need to measure up to our preconceptions: he had a job to do and stated it plainly in Luke 4.

Jesus Rejected at Nazareth

14Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. 15He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

16He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. 17The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

18"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
19to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."^[e]

20Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, 21and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

- Did you know Luke 4 is in your Bible? (restate and explain)
 - a. Midrash per Luke 4 (tell and ask questions with observations).
 - i. What was Jesus doing in the synagogue anyway?
 - ii. Isaiah is the Bible Jesus Read.
 - iii. Anointed refers to his baptism.
 - iv. Essentially this is Jesus' Kingdom Convention speech—his coming out address.
 - b. The Punch line is not so much economic reform but “a lavish work of the spirit, exorcisms, healings and teachings” for *all* people.³
 - c. Fundamentally the lesson is a profound one. God is for all people. Jesus had to remind the Jews of this. Just when the comfortable and rich thinks God looks like them or is on their side, he flips the tables in the temple to remind them that God cannot be bound to one particular God. No one can put God on a leash and control him. He's God.
 - d. Think. This is a Jewish carpenter. He's a minority in Israel. Israel is a minority in the Roman schema. That's double jeopardy in the “born with a bad hand” game of life. That should be an important clue about the inherent nature of what we mean when we utter the word “God.”
 - e. Cass Park has taught many of us, hence forth, to see God in all people for we all, in some way obvious or masked, bear the divine spark.
 - i. The eyes of a young black mother.
 - ii. The face of an older Asian man.
 - iii. A Vietnam vet.
 - iv. A White accountant with a master degree now homeless (whom I played cards with not too long ago).

- PM—There is an urban legend that God is a *White, Blue-Eyed, Blonde-Hair Republican Man*. Today, that legend is being laid to rest. We are going to bury it six feet under. God came to us in disguise, in a form we never would have ourselves suggested. He came to us in the form a Jewish carpenter from the backwoods of Galilee.

³Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sacra Pagina*, pg.

Announcements:

- Sara and Josh will be doing the teaching time together next week during second and third services.
- EA THIS COMING WEDNESDAY at 7pm.
- Refuge THIS COMING SATURDAY at 7pm.
- Cass Park TODAY
- Per Trudy Kessler: Please join the leadership team in welcoming Trudy Kesler to the Admin Support Team. Joey and Trudy have been an active part of ministry at Rochester Church for years and she will utilize much of that experience and knowledge in this new role. Her responsibilities will include support to Families with Children and Families with Youth LifeStages as well as work with guest and new member assimilation. She will begin Monday, September 17, which will help transition and prepare for Kelly Harrison's upcoming maternity leave in October. Welcome Trudy!