

Transfigured Before Them

[Matthew 17:1-9](#)

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“And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.”

“Dazzling white” sounds a like a line from a commercial for laundry detergent: Jesus, the bleach alternative!

How do you imagine this strange episode that was just described to us? It’s ambiguous. We don’t actually have a lot to go on. All we really know is that Jesus has had an encounter with God, an encounter so profound, so intense that he appears dramatically changed to Peter, James, and John.

As a child, I pictured the transfigured Jesus like a piece of classical sculpture, the kind you might find in a big museum in the grand hall of Greco-Roman statuary. I pictured him like one of those tall, exquisite figures—the clothed ones!—wearing long robes with drapery so realistic you cannot quite believe it’s stone. And in my imagination, the transfigured Jesus is carefully lit, like a piece of art, so that we can admire him in all his pale marble beauty.

It turns out, my thinking about both Jesus and Greco-Roman sculpture has changed as I’ve learned more about both.

Let’s start with the art and circle back to Jesus.

There was a fascinating [article](#) last year in *The New Yorker* called “The Myth of Whiteness in Classical Sculpture.” It described how archeologists have long had evidence that Greek and Roman statuary was intended, in its original state, to be polychromatic (many colors).

I’ll explain: thousands of years ago, before these statues were artifacts in museums, when they were pieces of everyday art in public spaces and private homes, they were painted all over. Time has stripped away most of the pigment, but the traces left behind reveal that the ancients loved bright, bold color, and that the statues had a wide variety of skin tones, including olive and pink and copper and coffee and black.

Now, as I said, there has been evidence of polychromy in classical statuary for a long time. But until recently, scholarship on the subject has been met with great resistance. Why? Because, as the article puts it, westerners have a “tendency to equate whiteness with beauty, taste, and the classical ideal.”

It was the 18th-century scholar Johann Winckelmann, often called the father of art history, who said, “the whiter the body is, the more beautiful it is.” The writer Goethe, his contemporary, declared that “savage nations, uneducated people, and children have a great predilection for vivid colors,” and that “people of refinement avoid vivid colors in their dress and the objects that are about them.”

Those are just two examples of the symbolic power of whiteness in art.

And symbols *matter*.

The *New Yorker* article describes how a University of Iowa professor named Lisa Bond published an essay about polychromy in Greco-Roman statuary and was subsequently harassed by hate groups. For white supremacists who idealize ancient Greece, and who falsely trace their intellectual and ethnic lineage therefrom, it is deeply threatening to be told that classical statues were not white, and neither were the people of the ancient world.

Which brings us to Jesus, a person of the ancient world.

I love that the Transfiguration story invites us to imagine Jesus' face, to look right into it, because while he is one of the most often-depicted figures in history, we don't know what he looked like and have no physical descriptions of him in our text. His actual appearance is a mystery.

But there are clues.

Several years ago, the magazine *Popular Mechanics* ran a cover story titled "The Real Face of Jesus." A team of forensic anthropologists, "using methods similar to those police have developed to solve crime," reconstructed the "most famous face in human history."

And there he is, in a picture accompanying the article: a dark-skinned, dark-eyed man with, according to the researchers, the features typical of a first-century Semitic male living in Galilee. He has a thick beard and short, black, curly hair. Let us also note that the average height of a Galilean male at that time was 5 feet (which is about my height).

In other words, Shroud of Turin this is not! Nor is it that famous Head of Christ portrait by Warner Sallman which hangs in many a church parlor. Nor is it the tall, elegant Christ of the Renaissance, rendered by Da Vinci or Michelangelo.

No, this is Jesus transformed, transfigured (if you will) into someone that many followers of Christ have never seen.

See, for a very long time, as you know, we've been told that the Word of God was made flesh in a *white* body. We've seen portraits and drawings and movies all featuring Jesus, Emmanuel, "God with us," as a white man. And not just any white man, but a tall, slender white man with brown or blond hair, and a narrow face and nose. And so God is made and remade in the image of whiteness, over and over again.

This version of Jesus is *everywhere*. I can tell you that even in 2019, it takes intentional effort to find images of Jesus that are not white, especially in material for children. In fact, bulletin cover image is by an African-American artist, Laura James, who remembered growing up with a white Jesus in her storybook Bible. This white man was supposed to be her Savior, and it alienated her. It turned her away from her faith—until, as an additional ult, she began painting Gospel scenes in the style of Ethiopian Christian iconography.

She remade Jesus, remade God, according to *her* image; a radical act.

And so I find myself asking:

How does the myth of white Jesus shape our understanding of God?

Our understanding of what is sacred?

Our understanding of *who* is sacred?

Our understanding of light and dark, and white and black, and good and evil? Are those all corresponding moral opposites? Light-white-good? Dark-black-evil? They shouldn't be. But have those associations been built up in our minds, over generations and generations?

How do white people *begin* to dismantle the white supremacy that is deeply embedded in our faith, in its language, imagery, and symbols? Is this our inheritance?

I think it's always worth asking questions like this. I think it's always worth trying to look at things differently, even when the questions that come with it are challenging. It's always worth the flash of insight that helps you see things more clearly.

I wonder if that's what the Transfiguration is really about. Whenever I hear the story, I tend to focus on Jesus and *his* transformation—the *glowing*, the *dazzling*—as the real action, the real point of the story.

But what if the point isn't that God changed something about Jesus, but rather that God changed *how he was perceived* by others? You see, the Transfiguration comes at a pivotal moment in the Book of Matthew, and in the cycle of the Christian calendar. Jesus' ministry is about to shift, just as we are shifting from the Season of Epiphany, which is really an extension of Christmas, into the Season of Lent.

In Matthew's narrative, Jesus is moving toward the Cross, toward the ultimate symbol of human cruelty and divine redemption. He's moving toward it to face it head on, and so are we. In fact, the disciples in this story are stand-ins for us. What they see and experience are meant to be signals to us: it is time to see Jesus differently. He no longer the sweet, inoffensive baby in the manger. Nor is he merely the clever miracle worker who turns water into wine. And he is clearly *more* than the itinerant preacher who says very thought-provoking things.

No, Jesus is about to *do* something profound, something terrifying, something absolutely life-changing and world-changing, and Jesus knows it, even if his disciples don't totally get it yet. So he's trying to prepare them for his death and resurrection, appearing to them in these white robes—the color of *martyrdom*—and standing with his fellow prophets, Moses and Elijah. Jesus is transfigured so the disciples might perceive him *rightly*, as the one who was willing to lose his life rather than betray God.

I think Jesus is trying to prepare us too, even though we may think we understand what's going on because *we* know the ending to the story.

Here's the thing: we actually don't know the ending. Not really. We know how *this particular* book, the Book of Matthew, will end. Likewise the Books of Mark, Luke, and John. We know that Jesus will be crucified and rise again, et cetera, et cetera.

But crucifixions still happen every day, in every place, whenever God's creation suffers under the abuse of human power. And I don't know about you, but can be hard for me to remember that death is *not* the final word, especially when it seems like relentless destruction is everywhere. It can be a struggle to keep our sight fixed on the resurrection. I forget what it looks like, or I search for it in the wrong place, missing it entirely. And so I think that death has won, that new life isn't possible.

Like the disciples in our story today, sometimes I need an act of radical transfiguration to help me see things differently; to shock me out of complacency, to shift my perception, to help me see a truth that was, perhaps, always there but that my own fears and biases and ignorance kept hidden from me.

Is there something in your life that is calling out for transfiguration? Is there something that you need to perceive differently? What do you need—what information, what insight, what experiences—to make that shift?

Or, perhaps, *you* are the one in need of a transformative and revealing encounter, one that will leave you visibly and inarguably altered, one that will help you to tell the truth about your story and help others see you as you *really* are.

We are, each and all of us, whether we know it or not, primed to be lit up by a holy mystery.

As we enter the season of Lent, may we find the courage and grace to bear God's transfiguring power, and all that it could reveal in and around us.

Amen.