



# chapter two

## BINARY: LIGHTNESS AND DARKNESS

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*John Dorhauer*

Metaphors of black/white and light/dark prevail throughout American myth and story, and reveal much about what is valued and what is not.

Even before my vocabulary could catch up to my conscious awareness of things, I knew the difference between what whiteness stood for and what blackness stood for.

If I saw a western, I knew that guy in the white hat was the good guy; the one in black, not so much.

I knew what the Psalmist was saying when she wrote: “cleanse me and I shall be whiter than snow.” (This wasn’t what she was saying, but I didn’t question that when growing up.)

When Robert Frost writes about being one ‘acquainted with the night,’ I could translate night into darkness, and darkness into depression.

When Tommie Smith and John Carlos stood on the podium with their fists upraised at the 1968 Olympic medal ceremony wearing a black glove, I was only seven, but I knew what I was seeing and why it made my dad so angry.

I knew why Disney wanted their hero to be Snow White, and why, when my own children began watching Disney, Aladdin, though Middle Eastern, was white and Jafar, the villain, looked—well, dark.

I knew what it meant for the president to live in the White House.

It made perfect sense to me that churches were almost always painted white.

Before I knew it, I was a child who knew that white was good, black was dirty. That light was positive and dark was scary. No one had to tell me that when I look at dark skin, I should be wary. Metaphor works at a preconscious level—and my entire childhood prepared me for being an adult in a world of white privilege. It wasn’t that I had to make a conscious effort to choose to participate in a racist culture. If left to that, I would have certainly chosen not to.

It was more the case that the culture had so perfected its commitment to whiteness as a metaphor for goodness that I never had to be asked to make a conscious decision to benefit from the privilege I had as a white man.

But this I must now do: unlearn everything I have



been taught about what it means to be white and what it means to be black. Learn and utilize new metaphors, becoming an active agent in the creation of a new world of racial equity. I must give my grandchildren a chance to shape deep understandings at a preconscious level before they fully absorb the teachings of a culture with ongoing commitments to whiteness as the norm.

*Stephen G. Ray, Jr.*

In a world lit by not much more than a campfire or torch, the night can be wondrous. It can also be exceedingly dangerous, because it presents manifold opportunities for hurt and harm by the red tooth of nature or the bloodied hand of a fellow human. It is good for us to remember that this is the world in which scripture was written. One has but to hearken to the 23rd Psalm for a preeminent example of this reality.

This is a significant reason why our scriptures are shot through with images of the goodness of light and the evil of darkness. Light is a metaphor for safety and the leisure to enjoy the beauty of the world we inhabit; alternatively, darkness is a metaphor for danger and death. This is, perhaps, a contributing factor to heaven being associated with the sky and Sheol with the bowels of the earth. Additionally, scripture was written in a world in which soiled persons and clothing were closely associated with bodily decay—a particular obsession in the Hellenic world—and bodily decay with death. Consequently, “clean” bodies and garments were associated with

health and wellbeing. All of which is to say, there are clear reasons behind the vibrant scriptural threads woven around light and dark as metaphors for clean and dirty. What is not so clear is how these categories and their import become attached to persons and communities.

A significant legacy of the cultural and theological rationalizations for chattel slavery has been both the explicit interpretation of Black bodies and the implicit interpretation of white bodies through the aforementioned lens. These interpretations created a continuum definitively locating goodness and health at the white end and badness and decay at the dark, with other-hued bodies placed along the spectrum between.

*It is good for us to remember that this is the world in which scripture was written.*

Perhaps the most significant operation of this continuum has been its effect on the distribution of social goods within our society. Put plainly, the more closely a person or community reflects the light (white) end of the spectrum, the more likely they are to have access to the best of whatever social goods exist in their context. If we understand social goods to include education, residential preference, financial access, and being the presumptive recipient of legal protection, it becomes quite clear that what we are



dealing with is privilege. Correlatively, unearned disadvantage and lack of access increase the closer a person or community moves to the dark (black) end of the spectrum. It is important for us to recall that, for the most part, neither this privilege nor this disadvantage is earned. Both are consequences of the cultural interpretation of human bodies.

A significant challenge for the Church is then the retrieval of the intent of the religious language of light and dark in a cultural context that has profaned them through their use to rationalize histories and systems of racial oppression. It is an open question whether we can. Can the words “wash me white as snow” ever be sung innocently again?

### *John Paddock*

We have so many metaphors about the lightness and darkness that surround us: metaphors in which light is good and honorable and pure, whereas dark is evil and dishonorable and impure.

I am writing this a few days after Easter. This past Holy Week, I was very conscious of the contrasts painted in the stories. Jesus was betrayed in the garden at night. When he was crucified, the Gospel of Luke says, “It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun’s light failed . . .” (Luke 23:44-45). Jesus was buried in a dark tomb. The resurrection was discovered in the morning during the light of day. Young men (angels) in dazzling white proclaimed that Jesus had risen.

I know that neither racism nor the color line existed when the biblical texts were written, but within our cultural context, they feed into the binary of lightness and darkness. We talk about the “Dark Ages” followed by “The Enlightenment.”

Years ago, I lived for a time in Scandinavia where during late fall and winter, nighttime lasted for up to 18 hours a day. It is a time of deep depression for many people and suicide rates peak. Here in the U.S., many folk are afflicted with SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder) when they are not exposed to enough sunlight. And, of course, spring in the northern hemisphere brings more light and growth and new life to the earth.

We speak of “night and day,” “white hats and black hats.” Brides wear white dresses to represent purity and innocence. “Dark thoughts” are bad thoughts. A quick glance at a thesaurus yields synonyms for dark as dim, shady, shadowy, murky, dusky, and gloomy, whereas light is sprightly, bright, sunny, graceful, nimble, elegant.

Brain science teaches that each time a synapse fires, it reinforces the connection between synapses. Clusters of synapses can form frames that contain thoughts and/or emotions. Our linguistic, historical, and cultural environments create many of these frames that assign good, happy, and joyful feelings to lightness, and bad, fearful, and anxious feelings to darkness. When applied to skin color, these same frames can be activated. When racist language and metaphors are attached, the frames reinforce negative stereotypes.



### Reflection Questions and Discussion Topics

*In your group, discuss some examples of the light/dark binary in literature, music, television, advertising, and movies. Ask what kinds of things might be done to shift and challenge these frames.*

#### **Da Vita D. McCallister**

My maternal grandfather was a small-framed man with kind eyes and a huge heart. He and my grandmother were married for over 50 years. His skin was black like a country night unfettered by city lights. It was smooth like deep rich chocolate and tight, yet soft to the touch. My grandfather was born and raised in Florida, and like many People of Color raised in the South, he spent many days and nights in the sun. The richness of the melatonin in his skin allowed him to hold onto those “kisses” from the sun and caused his hue to darken with time and age. As a small child, his color represented strength and power, but my ideas shifted as I entered school.

In school you could and often would be ridiculed for having “dark” skin. I grew up in Maryland and no one had skin as dark as my grandfather in any of my schools. Yet, I heard the teasing of classmates on a daily basis; the binary we lived in wasn’t White and Black, it was Light and Dark. As a Person of Color you were viewed more favorably if you had “Light” skin and harshly if you had “Dark” skin. I not only heard taunts hurled toward Children of Color but I am ashamed to admit that I was silent while it happened. Somehow, I didn’t think of my

grandfather in those moments, I was just happy that I wouldn’t have to bear that burden.

I learned early on that the standard of *Whiteness* required for beauty to be equated with lighter skin and this meant that Black skin could not be too Black; caramel was preferred to chocolate and tan over brown. The cost of the Binary of Light to Dark was steep. It reared its ugly head in the safety of my own home. My father was deeply concerned with my complexion. He worried that I might hold onto the “kisses” from the sun way past the summer and into the fall. Perhaps I had inherited my grandfather’s abundance of melatonin and I too would darken with too many days spent outside in play. I adored my father and sought to please him often, but his fixation on my hue often frustrated and perplexed me. We were “Black” and there was no way to confuse that point regardless of how much time I spent inside or outside of our home. I did not recognize that as a son of the South, my father was passing on his understanding of *Whiteness* as norm. He had learned the hard way that darker skinned Black people were treated more harshly and lighter skinned Black people were treated more favorably. This treatment was due to the assumption that the lighter the Black person the larger the influx of *Whiteness* in their gene pool.

I needed a way to push back on the binary of Light and Dark; some small way to make room for all of the beauty I found in the *Blackness* that surrounded me. I turned to my words and began to write prose. My attempts failed to capture my frustration and



they did no justice to the beauty in Blackness that I dreamed to exclaim, but it pointed me in the right direction. I began to search out the prose of other Men and Women of Color. When I heard James Weldon Johnson's "The Creation" I leapt with joy.

*"And far as the eye of God could see Darkness covered everything, Blacker than a hundred midnights down in a cypress swamp. Then God smiled."*

Johnson declared "And far as the eye of God could see *Darkness* covered everything, Blacker than a hundred midnights down in a cypress swamp. Then God smiled." The idea of God smiling at the Darkness gave me such a sense of pride and joy. My grandfather's skin was blacker than a hundred midnights and it was glorious to behold. Later in Johnson's work he penned these words:

Up from the bed of the river  
God scooped the clay;  
And by the bank of the river  
He kneeled Him down;  
And there the great God Almighty  
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,  
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the  
night,

Who rounded the earth in the middle of His hand;  
This Great God,  
Like a mammy bending over her baby,  
Kneeled down in the dust  
Toiling over a lump of clay  
Till He shaped it in His own image;

The image of God scooping clay from the riverbed reminded me of all of the clay I had seen, the dark lush and moist clay; the deep brown and dry clay; the oozing odd shaded tan clay; each of them hues in my family. Then just in case I had missed the inclusion of my people Johnson invoked a term that had been used as scorn for Women of Color – "Mammy." Yet, in his mouth this term was not a derogatory slur used to belittle Women of Color who cared for and nursed *White* children, but instead an image of the Divine creating humanity. Blackness was no longer the seat of scorn but a joyous celebration of Creation. The Binary of Light and Dark had been broken open in a retelling of creation. Thanks Be to God!

### Reflection Questions and Discussion Topics

1. Watch the video clip of James Weldon Johnson's "The Creation" read by Wintley Phipps on YouTube: [https://youtu.be/C-h4\\_VPXdoY](https://youtu.be/C-h4_VPXdoY) What did you hear as you watched the clip? What did you see?
2. Divide a single piece of paper in half with the word "Light" on one side and the word "Dark" on the other. Draw a single vertical line between these two words. Then write all of the terms you associate with the word "Light" on one side of the paper and all of the terms you associate with the word "Dark" on the other. Notice how many of the words include an implicit judgement (good/bad etc.). Are any of the terms associated with "Light" also associated with Whiteness and are any of the terms associated with "Dark" also associated with Blackness?
3. Return to the YouTube clip ([https://youtu.be/C-h4\\_VPXdoY](https://youtu.be/C-h4_VPXdoY)) of James Weldon's Johnson's "The Creation" read by Wintley Phipps and this time listen to the clip with your eyes closed. What did you hear as you listened and what did you see as you heard the words?



# chapter four

## THE WHITE JESUS

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*Stephen G. Ray, Jr.*

The recent spate of films drawn from the Christian scriptures, such as *Risen*, raises an important question for this curriculum. The question is simple. Why is it culturally so important that Jesus be white? The question arises because film, particularly as a marketable cultural production, reflects the sensibilities of the target audience. Rarely is it the case that in both subject and character portrayal do films so violate the general sense of possibility and accepted order of things that they become unintelligible.

This is particularly the case when the subject is a central figure for the narration of a community's history, one that guides the construction of its identity. For example, it is unimaginable to most people within our society that film and theater would routinely portray our Founding Fathers as people of color, save as an ironic device of disruption, as in the musical "Hamilton." Why, then, is it more than just imaginable but customary that Jesus be white?

We can trace the migration of the phenomenon from the symbolic portrayals of the pre-modern era, which no one presumed to be anything more than the appropriation of Christ into their context,

to the modern era, in which portrayals of Jesus are generally accepted as real. This reality is presumed ambiguous in most aspects, save one. So—while some films and books portray Jesus as regal and others common, some as a wise teacher and others as a rabble-rouser—they all share a common sense about the racial identity of Jesus. As a historical matter, we can trace this modern sensibility back to a faux archeological find, the Letter of Lentulus, which purported to give a contemporaneous description of Jesus:

His hair is of the colour of the ripe hazel-nut, straight down to the ears, but below the ears wavy and curled, with a bluish and bright reflection, flowing over his shoulders. It is parted in two on the top of the head, after the pattern of the Nazarenes. His brow is smooth and very cheerful with a face without wrinkle or spot, embellished by a slightly reddish complexion.

The import of this document is that it fixes within the popular imagination the idea that Jesus looked more like a European than either his immediate kinsmen or others in the geographic area of his ministry. The importance of this "find" is clear when we recall that this was the historical moment in which race was used as both a sense-making tool for interpreting

human diversity and a rationalizing discourse for the beginnings of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. There was very much at stake in the flesh taken on by the Word being white. Its continuing importance has to do with the social and theological systems and structures built upon that commonsense. Then, as now, the idea of the whiteness of Jesus was more concerned with locating God's providential presence in some in ways that it is not located in others. In the end, white supremacy is the idea that God is ultimately concerned with the people who hold a central place in God's plan: white people.

*White supremacy is the idea that God is ultimately concerned with the people who hold a central place in God's plan: white people.*

*Da Vita D. McCallister*

Alfred Street Baptist Church, a 213-year old congregation in Alexandria, Virginia, was the faith community of my childhood and remains the faith community of my family of origin. The pastor of my youth was the Rev. John O. Peterson, Sr. Rev. Peterson had a staff of clergy who supported the ministry and each was seminary-trained. Each Sunday when I entered our Church I was surrounded by erudite, edifying ebony faces. This was and is a Black Baptist Church. Our pastors were educated at a Historically

Black Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. They studied Hebrew and Greek, Liberation and Systematic Theology and were versed in Administration and Liturgy. Our choir directors were classically trained and the range of music I heard was diverse and deeply rooted in the African-American tradition. Growing up I knew our old church building like the back of my hand. It was an older building<sup>9</sup> with a basement, hidden stairs and a small sanctuary. I spent time in all of the classrooms and learned the best places to play when I needed to entertain myself as my mother attended Bible Study. Yet, the building that I loved, which was filled with brown bodies, was adorned with images of a *White Jesus*. He was in the stained glass windows on either side of the sanctuary. I walked past his image on most Sunday mornings and recognized his pale skin, brown silky hair, and small frame draped in a white garment and sandaled feet. I never questioned why he was the only white person in our church.

When I graduated from high school I attended Lincoln University just outside of Oxford, Pennsylvania. Founded as Ashmun Institute in 1854 (the named was changed to Lincoln University in 1866 in honor of President Abraham Lincoln), the college was known "colloquially as 'the Black Princeton' due to its Princeton University-educated founder and early faculty; rigorous classical curriculum; ties to the Presbyterian Church; and its similarities in colors and mascots (Princeton's colors: orange and black; Lincoln's colors: orange and blue; Princeton's mascot: the tiger; Lincoln's mascot: the lion.)"<sup>10</sup> My

<sup>9</sup> A new edifice was erected when I was in high school and serves as the primary worship today. The new structure does NOT contain the historic stained-glass windows

<sup>10</sup> Lincoln University Website: <http://www.lincoln.edu/about/history>



favorite spot on campus was the Mary Dod Brown Memorial Chapel. The deep dark paneled walls, matching hued pews and brick exterior made it a place of comfort and sanctuary. Our Chaplain, Rev. West, was a dark-skinned man with an unassuming voice and the energy to lead young adults. Yet, here in the cradle of Black Community, I did not find a single rendering of a Black Jesus.

When I graduated from Lincoln and began my matriculation at the Interdenominational Theological Center I wondered why those pastors from my youth had never distanced themselves from the White Jesus. I read Liberation Theology, just as they did, I was exposed to the Hebrew Bible, just as they were, and in every setting the *White Jesus* was questioned and interrogated. The likeness I had known throughout my childhood and early adulthood was not consistent with the biblical text's description, nor was it consistent with regard to the geography of his birth or the place of his hiding (Egypt).

Everything I read and studied in Seminary pointed to the probability that Jesus' skin was closer to mine and his hair felt like mine. So why was I denied this image of Jesus? Why did I feel no connection to the images that were hued with sun-kissed skin? Why was the conversation of Black Jesus problematic in my grandmother's home? What had worshipping a *White Jesus* done to my understanding of God and my place in creation? It took years for me to answer these questions. Here is a question I hope you will give serious consideration to: Would placing a photo of anything other than a White Jesus cause a conflict in your church?


*Everything I read and studied in Seminary pointed to the probability that Jesus' skin was closer to mine and his hair felt like mine.*

#### Reflection Questions and Discussion Topics

1. Consider the images of Jesus that you have seen throughout your life in Church buildings and sanctuaries. How many of those images were of a non-white Jesus? How did you feel when you saw a non-white Jesus?
2. When you participate in Holy Communion what color juice do you use in the service? Why do you use this color? How would individuals react in your community of faith if you changed the juice in the Communion cup to apple juice? If this would be a problem please explain why?
3. When you participate in Holy Communion what color bread do you use in the service? Why do you use this color bread? If the bread is not rye or pumpernickel, how would changing to either rye or pumpernickel be received in your church? Assume that this change would be for the majority of Communion services.

#### *John Paddock*

There is an Episcopal church in my community that is predominately African American. Their worship space was completely inaccessible to folk with



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walkers and wheelchairs, and the only way into the Sunday school and fellowship areas in the basement was a stairway. There was neither enough land to build a proper ramp nor enough space within the building to put in an elevator.

The church was located in a poor neighborhood with declining home values and rising crime rates. Many of the parishioners had previously moved to the suburbs and had to drive quite a distance to attend church events. Parking was also limited.

## *Who does Jesus look like?*

When I had a Sunday off from my own parish, I would attend that church whose pastor (a black priest) and I are friends. One of the features of that old building was a giant crucifix that hung over the altar. Nailed to that cross was a very white representation of Jesus. After much soul searching and fundraising, the church acquired land in a suburban area and built a magnificent new building. It has a very large parking lot, a completely accessible building, and plenty of worship, education, fellowship, and office space. The sanctuary is beautiful with all new furniture, altar, pulpit, and organ. It has a state of the art sound system and adjustable lighting.

So you might imagine my surprise the first time I entered the new church to discover the white Jesus crucifix from the old building hanging above the altar. Apparently, it had been purchased by a parishioner in Italy and donated to the parish. They weren't about

to dispose of their white Jesus. Every time I go into that sanctuary, I ask myself what it must be like to be black and to have the Savior represented as white.

Does that make God white?

When Christian education materials, church art, stained glass, and other representations of Jesus predominately show Jesus as a white man, what impact might that have? How do black children identify with their savior? How do descendants of slaves feel about being called into service of a white master? How is white privilege reinforced? Who does Jesus look like?

### *Traci Blackmon*

In 2009, I visited the Dutch slave castle El Amin on the Ivory Coast of West Africa. There were many traumatizing moments during that visit, and even now, eight years later, I can close my eyes and remember that place vividly, even down to the thick stench of blood that permeates the dungeon air all these years later.

I was expectedly angered by the cells where Africans who were to be enslaved were held until ships arrived. I was enraged by the portal in the floor of the courtyard surrounded by balconies where African women were roped and lowered into water to be cleaned off before being delivered to whatever hunter desired them for their rape pleasure. I grieved as I stood in the door of no return and wondered whether or not my ancestors passed this way. But

nothing traumatized me more than the pristine chapel erected in the center of the courtyard so that those responsible for the brutality of those days could still gather to worship their god.

And on the wall of that chapel, there is a white Jesus.

For me, white Jesus is a reminder of the dominant culture's insatiable need for supremacy and the toxic roots of racism woven into the fabric of American Christianity.

If my faith demands that I follow Jesus, then Jesus cannot be black. What does it mean that even staunch biblical literalists are resistant to displaying more likely depictions of the Afro-Semitic Palestinian named Jesus in houses of worship?

What does it mean to gather for worship in sanctuaries surrounded by lies etched in stained glass?

What might it mean to actually be confronted with images of Jesus that are not white? Is this incarnation of God somehow less worthy of our worship?

When I took my daughter, Kortni, for a 3rd grade admissions interview at the Lutheran school in our neighborhood, there was a large mural of Jesus with the little children in the foyer. I was impressed to see a black girl child among those surrounding this Jesus. Even in church, all the children depicted as having access to Jesus in this familiar scene are white.

After the interview, the teacher asked Kortni whether she had any additional questions, and Kortni replied,

“Just one. What makes you think that Jesus is white?”

*In Christian churches in Cairo, Jordan, Beirut, Ramallah, and Israel, there is white Jesus.*

The teacher and I exchanged glances, both baffled by the question. What was the impetus for this inquiry?


Kortni explained that she noticed the painting of Jesus and the children on the wall and she wanted to know why Jesus was white. She never mentioned the little black girl included with the children. She wanted to know why Jesus himself was not painted to look like her.

The gift, to a black child, of being nurtured in an environment where blackness is not exclusive, yet blackness is the norm, produces for all children equal self-actualization in the midst of crafted narratives that do not always affirm every being. Such an environment caused Kortni to question something I had long ago stopped noticing.

The teacher responded well by saying to Kortni that we do not have actual photos of Jesus and most artists tend to paint Jesus in their most comfortable image, and many of these artists in America are white.

There are many who embrace this explanation, but I suggest there may be something more.

In the Christian churches of Ghana, there is white Jesus.



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In Christian churches in Cairo, Jordan, Beirut, Ramallah, and Israel, there is white Jesus.

Jomo Kenyatta, former prime minister and president of Kenya, is quoted as saying, “When the missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible and we had the land. They said ‘let us close our eyes and pray.’ When we opened them, we had the Bible, and they had the land.”

I would add something else was left behind: white Jesus. I am not suggesting some conspiracy theory. However, I am suggesting that the soil of this country has been so thoroughly saturated with the fallacy of white supremacy that any depiction of a Savior with black skin creates dissonance.

I am suggesting the need for a white Jesus satiates a hunger for the worship of whiteness.

*John Dorhauer*


I remember the first time I walked into the Church of the Rock with Fr. Kevin Hederman, a white Catholic priest who was showing me around the streets of North St. Louis. There on the back wall was a large painting of Jesus that took my breath away. It was the first portrayal of Jesus I had seen in my entire life to that point that was not white. Jesus was black.

*Seeing black Jesus was shocking to me.*

I distinctly remember thinking, but not saying, that there was something very wrong about that. I was 19, maybe 20 years old. No one had ever said to me that Jesus had to be white, but I clearly had developed a sensitivity to that—and with that an expectation that he better be. Seeing black Jesus was shocking to me, I didn’t dare ask, but I really wanted to know why Kevin, this white priest, would put up with such radical behavior as this.

I am not very proud of that moment. Clearly I had absorbed fully what my white normative culture expected me to: that Jesus must be white. I had to re-sensitize myself, reorient myself to a whole different set of assumptions and expectations. Seeing that single portrayal—and it would be years before I would see another one, set me to asking questions about why I reacted the way I did. For the first time in my life, I told myself the truth about Jesus: that he wasn’t white. I knew he wasn’t black, either—but probably an olive-skinned Galilean Jew. Now, though, I had to come face to face with my privilege. I could allow for—no, require—that Jesus be white when I knew he wasn’t in fact white; but I could not tolerate him appearing black in front of me.

My personal faith journey has brought me to a place where I see beauty in all the ways that artists appropriate Jesus to reflect their culture’s expectations. Of that I am proud. But I am aware that the whiteness of Jesus remains for many white members, white churches, and white institutions a



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given. When my home church in St. Louis decided to replace their white Jesus painting with about a dozen or so pictures of Jesus—each with a different cultural shading and skin tone—the church had four or five white families leave the church.

One of the lingering, and actually pretty damaging, manifestations of white privilege in the life of the church is the ongoing commitment to portray Jesus as white. There is nothing at all wrong with expressing solidarity with Jesus by making him look like you and your race. There is something very wrong with accepting a status quo which makes that white Jesus your, or anyone else's, only choice.

### **Reflection Questions and Discussion Topics**

1. *Can you remember the first time you saw a portrayal of Jesus that was not white? What was your reaction?*
2. *Take a walk through your church and find every painting or picture of Jesus. What does it reveal to you?*