

6th Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 11, Year C
A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger
on July 20, 2025

Genesis 18:1-10a / Psalm 15 / Colossians 1:15-28 / Luke 10:38-42

*May we trust in the mercy of God for ever,
give thanks for what God has done
and declare the goodness of God's Name
in the presence of the godly. Amen.*

Our story from Genesis has an interesting ancient feature for us 21C readers. It's right there at the beginning:

*The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre,
as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day.*

But then the text goes from singular to plural and from divine to human:

He looked up and saw three men standing near him.

Some scholars think that the two are separate entities, and indeed, YHWH is used for the first *Lord*, and *adonai* is used when Abraham addresses the 3. But most scholars believe the 3 men to be the physical manifestation of YHWH who appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre. And some *Christian* scholars have suggested that the 3 men are the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The ancient literary feature is the presence of the Divine as humans. No scholars question the presence of YHWH.

This theophany, though, sets us up for the rest of our readings today. It introduces the millennia-old concept that no one has ever seen God. Yet, theophanies happen frequently in the OT, and those who hang with Jesus are in an ongoing theophany until Jesus' Ascension. The ambiguity of the persons who appear to Abraham emphasize that God is indeed near, yet remains mysterious. And I think that the Christ Hymn of Colossians takes that near-yet-mysterious character of God a bit further.

For us humans, since Adam & Eve, since Abraham & Sarah, we have struggled theologically and emotionally with the *remoteness* and the *nearness* of God and the *mysteriousness* and the *concreteness* of God. We talk about faith in the God whom we cannot see, but we also talk

about seeing God or Jesus in other people. One mandate in the Baptismal covenant is to seek and serve Christ in all people. So, we have this duty to discover the God whom we cannot see in others. It's right there in Colossians:

Christ Jesus is the image of the invisible God.

God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you.

Jesus is in *you*; Jesus is in *everyone*. So, *whom* does Jesus look like? The image of Jesus has been a controversy for over 2,000yrs! For the last 65yrs, particularly in the non-Euro-centric world, the image of Christ has diversified, the image of Jesus has gone woke!

We all know that Christianity is the Religion of Colonization. With colonization came forced conversion and an image of Jesus who was white and on the side of the powerful. Interesting to note that the earliest image of Jesus is in the Roman catacombs, and Jesus is dressed in Roman garb. It is thought that this was not a mal-appropriation, but a safety measure since the image is from the era of Christian persecution in the Roman Empire. To depict a Middle Eastern Jew would be a dead giveaway.

But, fast-forward 1,500yrs, and in every part of the world, the colonizers took White Jesus to non-white places and told those people to worship Him. The study book for some images I'm about to pass around, *The Christ We Share*, states of this Jesus:

The so-called 'raceless' European or American Christ who has a light skin, wavy brown hair and blue eyes.

Now, hundreds of years later, committed Christians – generations on from the forced converts – are trying to discover who Christ is for them and how to see Christ in themselves and other people, as Paul writes in today's Epistle: *the Christ in you*.

As the colonizers left starting in the mid-20C, two world wars lessened Europe's control over the Global South, and Christianity spread in the Global South as it rapidly declined in Europe and the United States. These events opened up the opportunity for the locals to start exploring who Christ was for them. They dove into scripture and they discovered their own lived experiences in the text. They also found Christ in the midst of their experiences both in scripture and in their present lives. This *liberated* them and their faith from the colonizers, and now their Christian faith is truly their own. There is a whole discipline of Liberation Theology, which originated in Latin America, and spread and adapted to Asia, Africa, Australasia and even

to the indigenous Christians of North America. And they started to draw, paint and sculpt. And the 'raceless' Jesus with blonde hair and blue eyes, the Jesus of the Colonizers and oppressors, became a Jesus who looked like them and who was in their midst. Jesus began to be truly incarnated into each culture as He has into every place throughout time. And now, the Body of the Christ who is the Savior of the World looks more like the world!

<Hand out images>

These images are from a collection put together by 3 missionary societies in the UK, organizations which, at the peak of their 'successes', we responsible for converting the indigenous peoples of large parts of North America, Africa, Asia and Australasia. I'll give you a minute to look at the images.

The collection includes white European images of Jesus, one of which is the actor Robert Powell in his 1977 portrayal in *Jesus of Nazareth*. I didn't include one because we have our very own super-white Jesus gazing down on us from the Good Shepherd Window.

Christ Jesus as the image of the invisible God is important to each one of us. Because we're human and cannot solely exist in an intellectual theological construct, we naturally create an image of Jesus for ourselves. And because we talk so much about seeing the Jesus in others – seeking and serving Christ in all persons – we need a way to do that. Can we recognize Christ like Abraham recognized YHWH in the 3 Visitors?

I think that Liberation Theology gave those of us in the West – we white Europeans – a way to better understand God in Christ just as it has for those in the Global South. Liberation theologians aren't concerned with the '*quest for the historical Jesus*' and what He said and did as much as European and American theologians are. Instead, they are concerned with the historical *activity* of Jesus as a human being, before He was worshiped. They aim to understand the relevance of Jesus' life and ministry for their history of oppression, injustice and exploitation. And within that, they discover Jesus the Liberator. They find in scripture – the same scriptures of the White Europeans – a Jesus who is present & active in the real lives of oppressed & marginalized peoples. They see Jesus bringing good news to the poor, releasing the captives and bringing sight to the blind, as He promises in Luke 4. And through the work of liberation theologians, we, too, can see that Jesus is not confined to that window you gaze upon every Sunday – which is whom Jesus was for those who installed the window and for many of us now. Jesus is that for us, but Jesus is much bigger than that, much bigger than we can imagine, yet, we catch a glimpse of the whole as we see Jesus in other people, particularly

other people who don't look like us, live like us or pray like us. They become *un-othered* as we begin see them as just as much a part of the Body of Christ as we are.

I think that now is a critical time to reflect deeply on how we encounter the Divine in other people and the very human tendency to create a visual element of Christ being the image of the invisible God. As our country seems to be formally moving toward a place that is only welcoming to those who are white European and middle class, hang on to these images, hang on to the diversity of images of Christ in the diverse peoples from around the world. As White Christian Nationalists are implementing structures so people of color are once again being systematically marginalized, we must remember that Jesus Christ is Jesus the Messiah *for all*! Not just for Europeans and European-Americans. Jesus Himself was not a white European. You will see that on the back page.

Our baptismal Covenant calls upon us to seek and serve Christ in all persons. Like Abraham's recognition of the Divine in his interaction with the 3 human visitors, we need see Christ in all whom we meet. These images – and many more – can get us started in expanding our understanding of the rich and varied tapestry of faithful Christians who make up the Body of Christ.

These images rose out of the human need for to see ourselves in Christ, a need that Paul knew and wrote of, and a need that Liberation Theology made space for in communities around the globe ... only a few decades ago. The Image of the Invisible God has been liberated from the stained-glass windows of Europe and North America by those who saw the Jesus of the Gospels liberating the poor and oppressed of ancient times and of their own times. And if Jesus is truly the liberator of *all*, then ALL must have the opportunity to sit at His feet like Mary did.