

ROOM FOR ME

A. J. Bouilly

I remember the very first time I saw a painting of a black person in a Latter-day Saint building. It was the painting titled “And Thou Didst Hear Me” by Elspeth Young, located in the Payson Utah temple. The piece features a beautiful woman of color kneeling with her head bowed, deep in prayer. One arm rests atop another, as her hands are folded, but clasp the ends of a white shawl that wraps around her shoulders into her lap, almost lost in the folds of a white dress that gently gathers on the floor. Perhaps the greatest thing about the piece is how Elspeth perfectly evokes the emotion and reverence of genuine invocation. Whenever I see that painting I can’t but help feel the Spirit. I feel frozen in the moment when you’ve borne it all to God and having nothing left to give. My heart beats with memories of the pull before the crescendo in the hymn of my supplication, where desperation for intercession borders on adjuration. It’s peaceful, it’s powerful, and she is me! Well, sort of. I am not a woman, but I still felt like this painting was there for me—“for the culture,” as one might say.

I remember the first time I heard a hymn that moved me. It was a chorus-only rendition of “How Great Is Our God” by an unnamed gospel choir. The spirit I felt in that chapel that day was simple, but strong. A group of earnest worshipers offering testimony through praise as their hearts bore witness to a truth that they knew cemented into my mind the validity of the words “the song of the righteous is a prayer unto me.”

As a lifelong member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I was taught that building a testimony and coming closer to God is a lifelong process, and that I should seek to follow the example set by Jesus Christ. With his help, we can overcome obstacles and endure trials

to achieve our potential. Why is it, then, that the trials and difficulties that I face seem to come from the very institution that I belong to? Some people's experiences in church can be soured by a particular person or leader. But as a person of color who has lived most of my life between the borders of Utah and Idaho, the obstacles placed in front of me have been rooted more in the systemic and problematic aspects of Mormon culture and Church history than individual disagreements or differences.

For example, my parents divorced sometime after my eighth birthday. I grew up living primarily with my mother and two younger sisters (my grandmother joined us sometime close to my freshman year of high school), and our family was about as stereotypically black as it could be in that regard. My mother held down multiple jobs to make ends meet while Grandma would keep the peace at home. Family outings would consist of going window-shopping to pass the time while orders to the bishops' storehouse were filled. Sometimes, if we were lucky, we'd come home with a new pair of pants or clothes for school from a thrift store nearby. In spite of our meager prospects, I never felt like I went without. In fact, having so little makes you aware of just how much you have.

My father (the white side of the family) was the first to get remarried. We (my sisters and I) started to bounce back and forth between our mother's during the week and our father's on the weekend. It was during these trips to visit my stepmother's family where I was first introduced to a "typical" Mormon household. The chatter of step-aunts, sisters, and grandmothers would float over the soundtrack to *Wicked* that played from the kitchen stereo where they cooked, cleaned, and packed leftovers for the week ahead. Step-uncles, brothers, and grandfathers would debate politics, sports, and religion from their reclining armchairs and couches whose springs had long since sprung. I would listen as the men recalled tales of bravery and fortitude from their pioneer ancestors. How, if the world could only just emulate them, we wouldn't have so many families in lines to pick up welfare checks! I would listen as the women talked about

their children. They would counsel among themselves how best to separate them from the evils of the world, from the things that were different.

As I continued in my Church education through Seminary and Sunday School, I listened and learned of the early (white) Saints who would thrive time and time again in the most hostile of environments purely through hard work and prayer. I memorized Joseph Smith's depiction of his first vision wherein we read of two personages whose brightness and glory defy all description, though I understood that they were white. I read the stories of the Nephites who were gifted a land of promise while their brethren were cursed with marks of blackness. I studied missionary materials showing white young men in black suits as they read the Book of Mormon to ethnic families in dilapidated homes. White young women were the examples of the virtues of modesty, chastity, and innocence in every lesson on the dangers of *steady dating*. I observed and felt the disapproving gaze of many a Church member as I passed and blessed the sacrament in a white shirt and long plaited hair. Friday afternoons were sometimes spent with close friends enjoying the activities of a canceled date. Those moments were bright lights in what would have otherwise been a dark night after hearing, once again, the phrase: "You're a great guy, but my parents . . ."

I continued my church attendance in college where I had the opportunity to stay in the same singles ward for my first two years. The bishop opened our first sacrament meeting of my second year with the amazing news that of the seventy-four young men in our ward last year, seventy-three of them had gone on missions! The bishop went on to close his opening remarks by announcing that the concluding speaker would be me, a veteran of the ward. Of course he failed to mention that I was a bit too young to serve the year prior, as I was only just turning nineteen. When I cut my hair for the first time in years, a counselor from the bishopric came to me and pointed out how sharp I looked, commenting that he would be happy to help me finish cleaning up and

preparing to serve a mission, when in reality I couldn't afford to pay someone to braid my hair any longer.

Reflecting on these experiences, I find that these formative points of my spiritual relationship with the institution were met with casual racism in some form or fashion. And yet, I cannot say that my life was filled with bigots, racists, or individuals seeking to put me down. My life has been improved and greatly blessed by my membership in the Church and by the individuals therein. The aforementioned experiences were instigated by and involved good, kind people from families who willingly served those in need without question. The study materials distributed by our seminary were not done so as an intended slight, but to help uplift and edify. The scriptures that I read are the word of God, and it was only when interpreted by the cultural views of other (white) individuals that those same words were twisted into justifications for racial prejudice. I have no doubt in my mind that the leaders of our wards and stakes are led by the Spirit in their decisions when they qualify for its companionship, as this is the same promise that is extended to every child of God on the earth. But how many of their actions are informed by their own biases and cultural backgrounds and the quotes they heard from Church leaders decades earlier? Does a stake president look at a young woman from a typical Mormon home and advise her against a mission because he feels it would suit her better to get married? Do accusations of sexual misconduct get brushed aside because the man is an upstanding member of the priesthood? How many families of color are looked poorly upon because they're waiting outside the bishop's office long after church has ended, never given a chance to explain, "I'm renewing my temple recommend"?

Fortunately, on the surface things are improving. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a living church, and great strides have been made in the name of diversity and inclusion for its members all over the world. I am grateful for the progress that has been made, and I look forward to the day when the memories I hold are whispers of

the past. However, today is not that day. The closer one examines the relationship between the gospel of Jesus Christ as taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Mormon culture that has spawned from it, the more it becomes apparent that my culture and identity as a black man simply do not belong.

There is no room in *Come, Follow Me* for the true stories of faith and courage of the black Saints found throughout the history of the church. To tell their story is to recall the lives of great men and women bound by the chains of policy and racist ideologies held tight by the prophet Brigham Young and his successors. There is no room in *Preach My Gospel* to explain why it took 126 years for true men of God to end church-sanctioned racism. Any justification for this discrimination must address and acknowledge the self-proclaimed racial superiority owned by those who didn't "sit on the fence." But those conversations still haven't happened. There is no room in *Hymns* for black spirituals, nor is there room, apparently, for more than five or six people of color in the Tabernacle Choir at a time. I fully submit that I know very little about the admittance and tenure of a Tabernacle singer, but as amazing as they are, how is it that a genre of music classically known for performances by people of color has so little diversity?

I am not the first to ask these questions or raise these concerns—far from it. But until the Church separates the teachings of the gospel from the culture that permeates its western American front, I fear that multicultural appeasement will continue to result in minimal diversity and that the privilege of white members will still be protected. Because as of right now in congregations in southern states, black boys will still see the posters of white young men suiting up in the armor of God while the gaze of the Savior watches over them in the reflection of a mirror. Little black girls will fill out the pages of their Personal Progress as they compare themselves to the young woman with fair skin dressed in white, climbing the steps of the Salt Lake temple. Biracial children will continue to lack a foundation for their identity: too racially black

to enjoy white privilege, but too culturally “white” to easily connect to their black heritage. “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other” (Matthew 6:24).

This same cultural dissonance felt by biracial children is felt on a spiritual level by Saints of color who struggle to fit their cultural identity into the prescribed outline suggested by the materials distributed through the Church. This divide can tear at an individual. When white is both symbolically and realistically our metaphor for good, the words left unspoken are loud for those who have ears to hear.

In spite of the trials and obstacles I have faced in my life, and continue to face this day, I can still say that I am a member of the restored Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I have a testimony of its truthfulness, and will stand by that testimony forever. My experiences are my own, and I am fortunate to have not endured the trials many other Saints of color have borne. I haven’t been disowned by my family, nor have I been outright persecuted for my race. With that preface, I say that things will change. It may take time, but are we not a patient people? It may be difficult, but hasn’t our strength been tested beyond a doubt? There may not be room in *Come, Follow Me* or *Preach My Gospel*, but I can tell you there is room for a painting; a painting of a woman located just after the entrance to the waiting room inside the Payson Utah temple. To me, she kneels as a reminder that no matter how little room there is for you, our Father in Heaven has room for us. As she prays, I feel the prayers of the Saints who were refused the blessings of the priesthood but persevered. Her head is bowed with the same knowledge that was given to Jane Manning James: the blessings of the gospel are not owned by white men but are given by God, and for me, for now, that is enough to carry on.