

Albs, Advent, and White Supremacy; or, Why the worship leaders have not been wearing those long white robes

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At the beginning of Advent, 2016, I wrote the following to explain why I and other worship leaders were not wearing albs. That practice continues, with the exception of “high holy days,” like Christmas and Easter. Here’s what I said back then:

Those robes, called albs derived from *tunica alba* meaning “white tunic,” were the standard business suit of professional Roman men in the early centuries of the Common Era. The alb did not become the go-to Christian priestly garb until the beginning of the 5th Century. “For example, in a transitional stage, Jerome, (341-420), distinguishes between everyday clothing and a special ‘suit of clean clothes for wear in church...’” writes J.G. Davies in *A Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, p. 367, Macmillan, 1972. Davies goes on to say that “all ranks of clergy wore the plain alb until the eleventh century.” After that, albs were by turns, more or less plain. Davies, writing in the 1970’s, concludes that up to present day the alb “is to be thought of as the archetypal ‘white robe’ of Christianity.”

Just as Davies’ tome went to print in 1972, a liturgical renewal in the American Lutheran church was gearing up. The centrality of the baptismal font as lifelong source of identity rather than ticket to heaven got heightened. Weekly Eucharist became the norm. The new green *Lutheran Book of Worship* reflected these renewed priorities, so the church shopped its closet for new-old symbolism. Out with the black cassock and surplice worn by clergy! In with albs! Albs were to be worn not only by pastors, but by assisting ministers, as well. White, it was then said, was the proper color for expressing the common baptismal identity of the priesthood of all believers—laity/clergy no distinctions. Biblical references that connected the color white with salvation were trotted out. At the Transfiguration, Jesus’ garments became glistening, whiter than any earthly launderer could bleach them (Mark 9:3), and in Revelation 6:11, martyrs each receive a white robe and beach cabana as they await the Big End.

But here is the thing. White as THE color of baptismal identity may no longer hold water. Historically, albs were the uniform of a professional class, the members of which had domestic staff—slaves?—to keep their whites really white. Here at UniLu, the practice of wearing albs has been limited to a narrow set of job descriptions. Why don’t all the leaders of worship wear these robes—the intercessor, the musicians, the members of the choir, the lectors and distributors of communion? Why don’t ALL the baptized wear white to church? Who decided that white was the default for salvation? Isn’t this liturgical white supremacy?

There is a lot to ponder here. Advent is a good time for such head-scratching, especially over questions of power. Do we take this further and question the wearing of collars and stoles by pastors? Is there any value in being able to identify from a distance those who have been “set aside” for particular work in the church? What would it mean if certain worship leaders wore robes of other colors or patterns? If we dropped white from our weekly fashion diet does that help us open our eyes to see other colors differently? (End of Advent, 2016, article)

Now, the Prequel

In the fall semester of 2014, weeks after the killing of Michael Brown by a white police officer in Ferguson, MO, a student from Harvard Divinity School came to UniLu looking for a field education site. After he walked through the doors, Caston Boyd was surprised that the field ed advisor would suggest UniLu, an overwhelmingly white congregation. Caston had no previous experience with Lutheranism. In Texas, where Caston came from, his grandfather had been a lay preacher in the AME Church.

Caston did decide to do field ed at UniLu and served as an HDS intern for three years. On the very first Sunday Caston was scheduled to serve as a worship leader, we met in the vesting room. I explained that it was the UniLu practice to vest to lead worship, and opened the closet with the albs. Caston scanned the robes in silence. Finally, he said, “They are all white!” In that moment it hit me for the first time that the usual “Liturgy 101” spiel about white being the color of baptism may have an expiration date for our time and place. That Sunday Caston put on an alb, reluctantly. After that, to preach or assist, Caston wore whatever made him feel most comfortable, usually a variation of black jeans with a dark shirt.

Two years and a lot of listening later, I decided to experiment with not wearing an alb. Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* was especially influential for me. Through the lens of tennis champion Serena Williams, an African American against the backdrop of the whitest of sports, Rankine unpacked for our time what Nora Zeale Hurston had written about in 1928: *I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background*. I asked: Is the alb one expression of the white canvas of our Lutheran worship in this country?

Fast forward: Fall, 2019

Before Lenny Duncan, the author of *Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the U.S.*, came to speak at UniLu on September 16th, I read his book. Chapter Five is titled, “Decolonizing the Liturgy and the Power of Symbols.” In the opening of the chapter, Duncan writes, “During my first year of seminary, I noticed that all the robes available for seminarian assistants during weekly worship were white—pure, crisp white with hoods...I perceived those white hoods as an existential threat against my personhood.” Duncan also explains that his current vestment of choice is a black cassock. He especially appreciates the number of buttons—33—which remind him of the years of Jesus’ earthly life. I’m glad that works for him, but for me a cassock is not the answer. Like the alb, the cassock as a church vestment is a hold-over from the ancient world of men’s fashion. According to Davies, p. 337, it was “part of normal civilian dress in the late Roman Empire.” In the 6th century, men’s hems got “shorter and more military.” Ever the conservatives, clergy retained the ankle-length cassock. In 1604 “The Anglican Canon LXXIV forbade beneficed clergy to go out in public ‘in their doublet and hose without coats or cassocks.’” Davies adds that when the Anglicans made cassocks *de riguer* for going out, English Roman Catholic clergy were forbidden from wearing cassocks in public. So, for me, having paid too much attention in liturgy class in seminary, Duncan’s solution sounds to me like wearing men’s underwear. Donning the black gown preferred by German Lutheran clergy is also not a happy solution because it seems to be is a symbol of academic achievement—especially in our own Harvard neighborhood, they are the robes of the professorial class.

Where do we go next and what should we wear?

As we approach Advent, 2019, might this be a good season to take an even deeper dive into the question. In addition to the symbolism on color, there the traditional language associated with Advent—darkness

overcome by light. What about moving from captivity to freedom? Going through the hymns in the Advent section of the ELW, I discovered how most take up this theme, beginning with 239 *Hark the Glad Sound*, verse 2: *He comes the prisoners to release...!* Is it time to break out of the evergreen/ever-lighter/ever-whiter Advent wreath? Expand our liturgical imaginations? I have a new appreciation for my agnostic mother's way of observing the days before Christmas. Together we made a chain of 25 construction paper links. Beginning December 1, each day a link would be cut with a huge pair of very sharp scissors. As the chain grew shorter, the baby Jesus—and present-opening—came nearer. I am not necessarily suggesting paperchains replace wreaths this year. I am asking that we engage in a comprehensive re-think regarding the symbols of our worship. Advent, after all, is a season of re-thinking, repenting—yes?