As we approach the Lenten season and Women’s History Month, we encourage you to take a journey in the shoes of biblical women. Too often, these women’s stories are silenced. We hope the liturgy, prayers and sermon ideas will help you embark on a powerful journey with your congregation during this season of Lent, or during Women’s History Month, or during any of months to come throughout the year.

**Ash Wednesday Liturgy**

One: Ashes, light, fragile, rising above the consuming fire.

Two: Swirling and dancing on particles of air.

Three: Like Bathsheba and Esther whose dances filled royal halls, Bowing and reaching, stretching and hoping.

One: Ashes, falling down around us, wiped away without a thought.

Many: Like so many people, stripped of rights and respect, trying to rise.

Three: Like Rizpah and Hagar, marginalized and excluded, Yet pushing on in deserts of sorrow and despair.

One: Ashes, marking the world with a delicate smudge, marking us.

Many: People, rising and falling, each of us leaving a mark on the world.

Three: Like those who loved despite the cost, like Ruth and Prisca and Mary, Bold and brave women, who valued love more than their own safety.

ALL: All who dance and twirl, fall and rise, and love through it all We remember them as we turn toward a season of Ash.
Suggested Scripture: 2 Samuel 11

In 2 Samuel 11, we learn that David commits adultery with Bathsheba. David is frequently lifted up throughout the scriptures as a noble man, even being referred to as a man after God's own heart. For some David enthusiasts, his sin is shocking due to his reputation of being a righteous, godly man. Therefore, it is easy to turn and cast stones at Bathsheba for David's transgressions.

A common narrative surrounding Bathsheba is that she purposefully tempted David by bathing in his view. Bathsheba is often referred to as "loose". She is blamed for David's sin. She is seen as manipulative, hoping to gain power from David. She is believed to be "asking for it" since she was obviously bathing to capture David's eye. However, a contrasting version reads like this: David's dwelling is high on a hill, making it possible to peer into homes that were on the slope. Bathsheba is practicing the Jewish cleaning rituals after her menstrual cycle, not seeking out the gaze of David. When summoned to David's home, Bathsheba does not know what's in store.

In the popular cartoon Veggie Tales, the David and Bathsheba story is depicted to children through Larry the Cucumber as King David coveting a neighbor's rubber duck. This only reinforces the idea that women are property for the taking. Throughout 2 Samuel 11, we never hear from Bathsheba. She is silenced, even in her grief. She cannot make a decision on her own. Due to the differing power dynamics between David and Bathsheba, sexual misconduct occurs. However, Bathsheba is the one shamed. She is the one who is "asking for it." In today's sermon, compare Bathsheba's story to the stories of women today who suffer sexual misconduct. Explore how women are often silenced and shamed when they experience sexual assault. Explore how women are often seen as property in society. Despite how the world views and treats women, lift up that God does not view women as property and that God does not wish to silence and shame women. Encourage the congregation to consider ways they can lift up the women in their lives and within the church.
Prayer for the Bathshebas in the World

Wonderful and merciful God, we admit that we have fallen into common narratives. Too often this world silences the voices of women. Too often this world shames women. Instead of lifting women's voices up, instead of hearing their stories, their struggles, we cast aside what they have to say. Lord, forgive us. Help us all do better. Help us lift one another up so that all feel heard and safe in this place. Compassionate God, we ask for healing for all those who are the Bathshebas in our midst. We pray that their stories will not go unheard. We pray for support, care and love for all those experiencing great trauma of sexual misconduct. We ask that the Spirit guide us to become an open, loving community that would embrace the Bathshebas of our world. Help us be a place of refuge. Help us be a space of love and caring. Help us be a body of Christ that extends healing out into this broken world. AMEN.

Sunday, February 21

Suggested Scripture: 2 Samuel 21: 1-14

In 2 Samuel, we learn about the grief of Rizpah, the concubine of Saul. The Gibeonites come to King David, telling him that there is "blood guilt" on Saul due to his ruthless executions of their people. David asks what he can do to right this wrong and the Gibeonites demand retribution from the House of Saul. They demand seven of Saul's sons to be given to them. They impale these seven men on a mountain in Gibeon, their bodies exposed to the elements and animals.

Two of the sons that are taken are from Rizpah, Saul's concubine. In her grief, Rizpah guards her son's corpses on that mountain. She does not let the birds touch their flesh. She guards their lifeless bodies from the elements the best she can. When David hears of Rizpah taking post by her sons' bodies for many months, he gathers the remains of those who had been impaled for a proper burial. Rizpah, finally achieving justice for her sons, leaves her post.

Looking at America's history of brutality towards African-American men's bodies, we find Rizpah in their grieving mothers. We hear their cries on the nightly news. We see them protecting their sons' bodies by
demanding justice, by being called into action, by seeking respect for the life they lost. In today's sermon, lift up the Rizpahs in the world. Call them by name. Hear their cry. Lift up their strength.

Prayers of the People-Call and Response

One: God, we hear their cries, we hear their weeping.
Many: We see their strength. We see their injustice.
One: Lord, we lift up the many mothers who have lost their sons to hate and brutality.
Many: We remember the people whose lives they touched. We remember their friends. We remember their mothers. We remember the lost opportunities.
One: Emmett Till. James Byrd Jr.
Many: Lord, hear our prayer.
One: Michael Brown. Tamir Rice. Freddie Gray.
Many: Lord, hear our cry.
Many: Lord, hear our suffering.
One: Walter Scott. Laquan McDonald.
Many: Lord, hear the cries of all those weeping due to these senseless acts of violence towards black bodies.
All: We pray for healing. We pray for justice. We pray for a world that will claim black lives matter.

Sunday, February 28

Suggested Scripture: Esther 4:1-14

Esther is a beloved heroine of the Hebrew Scriptures. We remember her as the one who answered God's call on her life, which gave her the courage and strength to go to her husband, the powerful King Ahasuerus, and risk her life all for a simple request. In fact, it was more of an invitation to dinner with her husband and his chief henchman, Haman.

In our context this sounds peculiar. Why should a woman be fearful of asking her husband and his business associate to dinner? Why should her beloved uncle, a man who was like a father to her, need to ask her to
make the invitation not once but twice? Esther's context is an example of patriarchy, and monarchy, gone wrong. A person merely approaching the king without being summoned faced possible death. It is nearly impossible for us to be able to comprehend the fear of Esther.

So, a terrified Esther comes before her husband's throne. However, that is not all her Uncle Mordecai asks of her. She is also tasked with unmasking Haman's plan for the genocide of the Jewish people. She plans carefully, building relationships and letting circumstances unfold until the time is right. Then she makes her request.

When were you asked to do something that petrified you? How long did it take for you to respond? Did you recognize God in the call?

A Prayer for the Esthers in Our Lives

Calling and Compelling One, you see the needs of the world and call us to respond. At times this takes courage beyond anything we can imagine. It may even mean risking our lives. Yet, you call us anyway, knowing that the risk is worth it and that the potential for good outweighs the bad. Open us, loving and empowering One, to hear you when you call and to answer with hearts that trust you. Help us to overcome our fears and be like the courageous people in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures who hasten to serve you at the appointed hour. AMEN.

Sunday, March 6

Suggested Scripture: Ruth 1:1-17

The story of Ruth is one of unyielding loyalty. A widow, Naomi, is living in a foreign land with her two sons, and their wives, Ruth and Orpah. When the sons die prematurely, the matriarch plans to take her two daughters-in-law back to her homeland, Judah. However, Naomi, an unmarried, childless women unable to have progeny of her own, faces her own challenges in Judah. The burden of relocating her sons' two foreign born widows becomes enormously clear during the journey. Naomi has a change of heart and encourages the two women to return to their mother's home.
In a world in which women are valued for the ability to reproduce and find protection in the home of their father or husband, Naomi is extraordinarily vulnerable. Persuading Orpah and Ruth to remain in Moab was the most practical response. However, Ruth is devoted to Naomi and insists on following her to Judah. Despite Naomi's lack of gratitude and deep depression, Ruth remains by her side.

Ruth's fidelity and persistence result in a happy ending to the story. She married Boaz and had a child with him. That child became the grandfather of King David, and Ruth is one of five women named in the genealogy of Jesus.

It is not always easy to be loyal to a person or cause. Despite her good fortune, Ruth never turns away from Naomi. Her constancy, in spite of the odds, results in a life well lived and remembered. Can you think of others who have shown unfailing allegiance despite all odds? How have that person's choices changed their communities, or even the world?

A Prayer for the Ruths of the World

Faithful One, who asks us for steadfastness in places where we are not always welcome. Loving one who asks us for longsuffering when others find our love is too much of a burden to hold. Help us to know that our devotion to the people in our lives is an answer to your call, even when we are unsure. Help us to remain true, even when there is little reason to stay. We ask these things so that we might know the joy of loving others as we love you, our gracious and giving God. AMEN.

Sunday, March 13

Suggested Scripture: Genesis 21: 1-32

Hagar's story is about a foreign, slave woman, whose value is briefly acknowledged before she is callously thrown away like trash. She is the concubine of the barren wife of Abram, Sarai. Sarai is unable to give Abraham the offspring that are required for (a) his legacy to continue, (b) for God's prophesy to be fulfilled, and (c) for her value to be recognized.

Therefore, she offers her handmaiden, Hagar, as a surrogate to carry Abraham's child. However, when the child is born and Hagar's human
and reproductive value are proven, Sarai's jealousy and contempt for her servant boil over. Initially, Hagar runs away, only to be persuaded by a prophetic angel that submitting to Sarai is a small price to pay for the destiny of her young son. Later, Abraham, prodded by Sarah, sends both Hagar and her son into the wilderness with insufficient supplies.

Like the story of Ruth, themes of racial and gender injustice abound in this story. We see the worst ways women in positions of power insult and abuse other women they deem "less than." Sadly, the powerful frequently presume they have "earned" their influence, rather than acknowledging their own privilege of birth, education, race or gender. Rather than using authority for the good of people, and even being gracious in sharing power, in some cases, even for one blessed by God, the temptation to control another human results in condescending and cruel treatment.

It is interesting to note that the term for God in this passage is El Shaddai. It is usually translated as "Almighty," derived from the word "shadah" which means mountain. However, there is growing scholarship that is convinced that the word comes from "shad" meaning "breast." It is possible that El Shaddai, as used in this pericope and in 48 other places in the Hebrew scripture, refers to the "Breasted God." It is also notable that the mountains and breasts are often shaped similarly, suggesting that these two interpretations are not mutually exclusive.

Those in power, regardless of gender, have a responsibility to mentor and grow those who have not had the same opportunity. How do we understand all people as having sacred worth in the eyes of God? Can you think of a person who has acted as both a role model and mentor to you in your life and career?

**A Prayer for the Hagars Who Surround Us**

Source of all being, show us how to love those who are like us, and mostly, those who are not. Deliver us from the temptations that jealousy and power invite. Help us to recognize the worth of all humans, to raise up those with less power and authority, to celebrate their joys and lament their pain. Make us keenly aware of the power we have over the other so we might use it ways that promote inclusion, growth and healing, not exclusion, diminishment and harm. May we remember that it is only by your grace that we live at all. In the name of Christ. AMEN.
Sunday, March 20
Palm Sunday

Suggested Scripture: Acts 18: 18-27

Throughout the New Testament, we learn a little bit about the ministry Prisca and Aquila and their partnership in ministry. The Apostle Paul journeys with this couple. Paul entrusts Prisca and Aquila to minister in their own context. The pair demonstrates this by how they mentor and minister to Apollos. Although Apollos was showing great promise for ministry and proclaiming the Good News, but he only knew of the baptism of John. Recognizing his gifts and need for learning, Prisca and Aquila take Apollos underneath their wings to teach him more of "the Way of God."

Not only does Prisca serve as a mentor in the faith, she also continues to take risks in her ministry. Throughout the New Testament, we see Prisca and Aquila doing amazing ministry and taking incredible risks. Prisca is quite the incredible woman. Even in biblical times, she is quite the trailblazer. When Paul greets the couple in letters, she is usually named first. She risks her life to pursue her call to ministry. She travels all over. She faces adversaries. In a society that understands a woman's main role as being a wife and mother, Prisca knows she is called to so much more. Prisca is willing to lay her life down for the Way of God.

During your Palm Sunday sermon, imagine Prisca in the crowd. Imagine how, after seeing Jesus pass by on the donkey, she feels something stirring up inside her. Imagine how she understands this stirring calling her to an extraordinary life. Imagine that as she lays down her cloak, she is also laying down her life before God. Explore how we need to lay down our lives for something extraordinary—the Messiah who arrives on a donkey. Explore how this world and our lives will never be the same after we lay our lives down.
Worship Experience

Consider having the women or key women leaders in the congregation process into the church waving palm branches exclaiming, "Hosanna in the highest!"

Call to Worship

One: Hosanna in the highest!

Many: Hosanna to the one who arrives on a donkey.

One: Hosanna to the one who calls us all beloved!

Many: Hosanna to the one who gives us hope and inspiration!

One: Hosanna to the one who calls us to take risks!

All: Hosanna to the one for whom we lay down our cloaks, lay down our palms, lay down our lives! Hosanna!

Sunday, March 27
Easter Sunday


When Mary of Magdala, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, as well as other women, arrive at Jesus' tomb on Easter morning, their sorrow and pain are palpable. They have come to anoint his cold, stiff body with prepared spices, despite their physical inability to roll away the stone from the cave entrance. Heartbroken and shaken, we can only imagine their shock and horror when they find the tombstone rolled away and Jesus' body gone.

Fortunately, angels appear and deliver the news to the women, "Jesus is not here; Christ has risen. Remember what he told you?" We have come to understand this as "good news," and sure, it's good news for us today. However, how good was it for these women? The men must have scoffed when they heard the women were going to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body, in spite of no reasonable plan to remove a boulder weighing close to a ton. Now these women were charged with telling the same men this incredible, stupendous, unbelievable and unimaginable news. No one would be believe them, and they would be called crazy, hallucinating, hysterical women.
It is Peter who decides to visit the tomb and see for himself. He discovers that the women's report is true to his amazement. How many times do we doubt the word of another person, even when there are multiple witnesses, due to their gender or our perception of their emotional state? How frequently do we dismiss the competence and credibility of a person based on their gender alone? What will it take for us to believe the amazing and incredible things that Christ tells us, even when they come from the least expected places, namely from women, children, immigrants, and the poor?

Why do we doubt the power of Christ to make the good news known through all people, even those we devalue, but God raises up?

An Easter Call to Worship

One: Do you seek the living among the dead?
Many: Do you doubt the prophesy of the living God?
One: Seek and doubt no more!
Many: The good news is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow!
One: Take heart, believe and know the truth!
ALL: CHRIST IS RISEN! CHRIST IS RISEN INDEED!

Final Thoughts

During our journey in her shoes, we have covered some difficult wilderness terrain. We have heard the stories of people in the wilderness, wandering, alone and afraid. What would it take for them to experience new life? What would it take for us to experience the same thing? How can our church be a place of warmth and welcome in a world that can be cold, hard and painful?