Introduction

Sermon Resources for Women’s History Month
In this season of Lent, many worship spaces and visuals are marked by purple. In the Church, the color purple has traditionally been used to symbolize two emphases of the Lenten season. First, purple symbolizes mourning and penitence, in response to the pain and suffering of Jesus in the passion narrative. Second, purple, which in the Roman Empire was a color worn by the Emperor and others in places of authority, symbolizes the royalty of Jesus, and his ultimate victory over death and evil.

Coincidentally, the color purple connects us to the thematic lens of this Lenten commentary series—celebrating the experiences of women, in honor of Women’s History Month. Along with white and green, purple was used to represent the cause of the suffragettes beginning in the early 20th CT, and was incorporated as a visual marker in the long struggle against sexism.

In her collection of essays entitled, “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens,” writer Alice Walker reframed women’s struggle against sexism through the imagery of color. Introducing the term “womanist,” a word anchored in the linguistic tradition of the black community, Walker opened the door to articulating the differing experiences and levels of oppression existing among women. Here is an excerpt of Walker’s definition:

1. FROM WOMANISH. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. Serious.

Walker ends the definition of “womanist” with: “Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.”

This distinction in the hues of purple brings to light the additional dimensions of racism and socio-economic marginalization experienced by black women. Embracing Walker’s term, black female theologians have challenged our understanding of theology by speaking of their experiences as those who have experienced sexism from black men, racism from white women, and suffered the systematic socio-economic and political consequences of such oppression. Purple has come to symbolize the anguish and struggles of black women, and broadly, all those who seek to survive.
and thrive in the midst of multiple modes of oppression. The tradition of womanist theology seeks the holistic flourishing of all people, especially those who are most vulnerable of all gender identities. As such, the color purple simultaneously symbolizes the strength and creativity with which those from the underside of society seek life.

This month’s sermon notes will all arise from the wider theme of hearing God’s word from the experiences of women’s stories and proclaiming the call to live out the gospel.

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WEEK 1: March 1, 2015

Lectionary Texts

Introduction
The richness of meanings we find in the Lenten color of purple—especially the calling to mind the experience and perspectives of those who are rendered abject among us—provides a powerful lens to understanding the Gospel text for this Sunday. In A Feminist Companion to Mark, Joanna Dewey cautions the reader from approaching Jesus’ admonition to “deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (NRSV, v 34), without giving proper attention to the cultural, historical, and narrative context. Modern and Western readings of this iconic statement have often interpreted Jesus’ emphasis on discipleship as “a glorification of suffering and an encouragement to become a victim: one is to deny oneself, sacrifice oneself, wipe out any sense of self, and to embrace the cross, that is suffering in general” (23). Dewey acknowledges that too many women “failed to develop her own identity and strengths and has embraced or endured suffering that could be alleviated because she has come to believe that such a way of life is pleasing to God and an imitation of Christ” (23). To simply read this text as a valorization of suffering and victimization is a gross misreading. This text defines faithful discipleship as aligned with the realities of God’s Kingdom, even in the face of persecution from those in power. Ultimately, disciples are encouraged to seek life—true life—as defined by Jesus.

Christian churches once made a common practice of instructing women to return to an abusive husbands (by clergy, no less!), and often thus to her death, because suffering was understood as a God-sanctioned way to “deny themselves and carry their cross”! This counsel still happens today, but a better interpretation directs these women to seek safety, counseling, help, possibly a restraining order, and communities of support and love. The “cross” for abused women to bear would have been the path toward a sense of self defined by God’s love and building up a new life free of abuse. A Lenten practice of “self-denial,” for an abused woman, for example, might involve the denial of lies and a claiming of her worth, value, dignity and giftedness as a beloved and most cherished child of God. The Lenten call to “repentance”—which from the Greek means to turn away from a formerly held belief, or to change one’s mind about something—would involve turning away from destruction of self, and toward life.

Sojourner Truth
Sojourner Truth is a powerful example of how women can live faithfully as a disciple of Christ. Sojourner Truth was born into slavery in Ulster County, New York, around 1797. When she was around nine years old, she was sold to another slaveholder, and away from her family, for
$100 at an auction. In her adulthood, as a free woman, Truth worked tirelessly for almost 40 years until her death as an evangelist and social reformer. She traveled all around the North, East, and Midwest preaching and giving lectures on the abolishment of slavery, women’s rights, temperance, and after the Civil War, for the general welfare of black communities as the freed slaves transitioned into a new way of life. Despite voices denouncing her and her work, from fellow Christians at that, Truth understood Jesus’ calling to discipleship correctly, and lived it faithfully. She refused to “bear the cross” of racism, sexism, slavery, or other modes of oppression—as she was told to by much of society and the authorities of the Church. Instead, she listened to God and took up the cross of courage to preach the gospel. Sojourner Truth was able to denounce the lies of the world and worked for liberation from oppression, even in the face of persecution.

In the purple season of Lent, may the Holy Spirit guide us, our congregations, into true forms of faithful discipleship – discipleship that liberates, brings more love, shines light in places of darkness, and pulses with life. May we take up our crosses of courage and deny the power of oppression to silence the gospel.

Sources Consulted

The brief introduction to Sojourner Truth is from the following biography:

Resources for those interested in womanist theology

Williams, Delores S. Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk.
Week 2: March 8, 2015

Lectionary Texts

Living According to God’s Vision
Living according to God’s vision of things is not always going to be pretty. In the Johannine retelling, Jesus, visiting the Temple during the Passover season, creates a public scene. Jesus’ demonstration makes a theological point about God’s sovereignty (“Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”) in the face of an oppressive Empire. In her commentary on this passage, Marilyn Salmon provides the helpful political and social context of this scene. The Temple was a complex and sophisticated nexus of religious leadership, worship and sacred rituals, a place of economic exchange and symbolism that had been annexed to serve the purposes—financial and otherwise—of the Roman Empire. A theological point, in this case, of God’s sovereignty over the sacred space of the Temple is a political point—God, not Caesar, has the ultimate say.

Jesus shoos the animals and the merchants from the place, overturns tables, and pours out the coins. As Salmon suggests, this was most certainly received, and noted by the Roman Empire, as defiance to its power. Jesus’ actions would have been assessed as foolish and insolent. And we know that the powers of the world reward such resistance with crosses.

Pursuing God’s vision will place disciples at odds with prevailing notions of respectability, in conflict with convention. God’s vision for what is just and good will stir action that goes against “etiquette” as defined by the powers-that-be.

The realities of sexism and gender essentialism (the belief that there are certain, inherent traits tied to a gender—an insidious form of stereotyping) are felt by women who exercise leadership, especially with the kind of boldness and courage displayed by Jesus. Women are often punished with violence in words and deeds, and with particular zeal, when they act “out of line” with standards of “femininity” set in place by patriarchy. Unfortunately, misinterpretations of Scripture have been used to glorify a certain type of female discipleship—one done in docility, subservience, and a saccharine politeness.

Discipleship Takes Grit
Discipleship requires us to advocate for the oppressed, and to take a stance against those in power who abuse their authority. That might involve “making a scene.” And those in places of power and privilege (in society, and alas, in the Church) will do its best to put disciples—particularly women, ethnic minorities, immigrants, those in the LGBTAI communities—back “where they belong.”

Shame is the first weapon of choice in the breaking of spirits and the cultivation of silence and passivity. Epithets, ugliness, and bitter words await those who dare to walk counter-stream. We
are all aware of the names especially reserved to denigrate women who “do not know their place,” who speak too loudly or too persistently. Further, righteous indignation and anger, outrage at injustice, will be distorted as “unbecoming” or being “hyper-sensitive.”

As a note of caution, Andy Alexis-Baker, reminds us that this Gospel text has historically been misused to justify Christian violence. John Wesley was careful to observe in his notes to the New Testament: “it does not appear that [Jesus] struck even [the animals]; and much less, any of the men.”

**Together, We Remember**

We remember Rosa Parks who made a scene on the bus when she refused to give up her seat. I remember that a woman from a congregation I served, a professor at a local university, took to task the school administration when they neglected to fix a broken elevator. She was aware that a broken elevator means students and staff who were abled differently cannot participate in courses or meetings. No one else spoke up, so she did. I remember two women, active leaders in a different congregation, who were concerned about the environmental and health impact of an oil refinery that set up shop in their small town. They mobilized the members of the town and took political action for the sake of the environment and the children who would be most vulnerable to the chemicals that seeped into the drinking water.

I wonder what names these unrelenting women would have been called by those who felt threatened, annoyed, or offended by their assertiveness. We, however, honor them with names that ring with truth—beloved, daughters of God, ushers of the Kingdom. They are disciples of Jesus Christ.

**Sources Consulted**


For another instance of women “making a scene” for justice look into *The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo.*
Week 3: March 15, 2015

Lectionary Texts

For God So Loves the World
The connection of Jesus, the Human One, to the strange story of snakes and salvation in Numbers is not the only reference to the Old Testament in the Gospel text for this week. The term “world” (kosmos) winks at us, and directs us back a few chapters to John’s prologue. For there we will find the iconic opening words to the Johannine version of the gospel: “In the beginning...” (John 1:1). And “in the beginning,” in turn, takes us all the way back to Genesis. The writer of the Johannine gospel seeks to continue this connection to the creation story throughout the narrative: for indeed, God is creating something new in and through Jesus. Even at the end of John, when the resurrected Jesus greets Mary Magdalene, he is mistaken for a gardener (20:15), and this scene, occurring on the first day of a new week (20:1), glimmers of a new Garden of Eden—the new creation inaugurated.

“For God so loved the world...” (3:16) becomes all the more richer and fuller when we keep in mind all that is represented by “world.” In fact, I would encourage you to consider the creation narratives of Genesis as a footnote to the word “world.” Then this “world,” which God so loved— with God’s great, full, all-encompassing agape love—will come alive for you, revealing its dense weight. Yes, God so loved the world—the world of sky and firmament, birds and Leviathans, hand-crafted mud-pie humans, light and dark, creatures big and small, all in the glorious web of interconnectedness. God so loved this deliriously beautiful creation, called it good, and could not, would not, give it up to destruction.

And so Jesus, the fleshted glory of God (1:14), was sent (3:17) (the word “apostle” is from this Greek word) into our cosmos of sight, touch, smell, sound, heartbeats and tears, sweat and urine, pain and blood. Jesus came as one of us, bearing the raw reality of God’s self-giving love.

The key is not to let the poetic words of the gospel writer facilitate our tendency to spiritualize away the physicality of God’s presence to God’s creation in Jesus Christ. For if we make the “world” and the “Son” too abstract, the issue at hand, “salvation,” will also become a fanciful play in thought. Because Jesus the Human One came to the world very much anchored in physicality, the salvation which he brings is also to be manifest in tangible ways in our bodied lives, now, and not later. God’s salvation reality, the process of healing and restoration, God’s promise of new creation and new beginnings, begins the very moment we warm ourselves in the light. We need not wait until we are dead.

Salvation is not just for souls. Salvation is for the entirety of our being. Salvation is for all creation. Not only are humans better off because of Jesus’ foray into creation, the eco-system is
too. Rivers, tigers, pelicans and rocks are in the group salvation package. God so loved the world; not just parts of the world—all of it.

Lent, then, is quite a welcome time and an opportunity to perform an about-face toward the light.

**Living A Salvation-filled Life**

One particular afternoon with my grandmother comes to mind. I was visiting with her over summer break. I was ten or so. A little bit of the juice I was drinking splashed over on to a piece of furniture. Nonchalantly I whisked out a full piece of tissue from a nearby tissue box to wipe the few drops. After watching me, my grandmother gently pulled me to her. “Do you think you could have wiped the few drops with half the tissue?” “I think so,” I replied. “I try to use only as much as I need so that I don’t waste our resources. Wouldn’t you say that’s one way we can help our environment?” I agreed.

And I noticed, even as a child, that her life was indeed ordered around that principle. She made sure the lights were turned off when a room was not in use, reused water when she could, and was conscientious about whatever else was at her disposal. What I also noticed was that she did this with grace, with a spirit of generosity. I could sense she was being self-disciplined so that she could be generous to a wider net of people, her community, and other living beings. The next time I spilled some juice, I made sure the tissue fit the need. It was a simple yet profound way for me as a child to start realizing that my actions impact a world that was bigger than me. As an adult I can see how in my grandmother’s life, these were the little manifestations of a life lit by Jesus: God so loved the world, and so would she. The ethic of parsing a tissue—for after all, the world was not hers to consume—was rooted in a salvation that was being lived out on this side of the grave.

**Sources Consulted**


**Resources**


John 3:16 is used frequently for evangelistic purposes, a kind of evangelism that pushes a checklist of doctrines for neophytes believe. To believe Jesus is often entirely conflated with acquiring intellectual assent. This book introduces women whose understanding of evangelism was more holistic. Their way of evangelism included social justice at its core: revealing the good news of salvation through transformed communities.
WEEK 4: March 22, 2015

Lectionary Texts
Jeremiah 31:31-34 | Psalm 51:1-12 (UMH 785) | Hebrews 5:5-10 | John 12:20-33

The Path of Jesus
As Jesus’ ministry unfolds, and the signs and wonders revealing his identity stack up one by one, the inevitable collision between the ways of God and the ways of “the world” draws near. The raising of Lazarus was the final draw for the religious authorities, who were concerned that the more popular Jesus became, the more their already vulnerable communities would become targets of the ire of a powerful Roman Empire (John 11:48, 53). The more pronounced God’s reign becomes in the life and ministry of Jesus, the more Jesus and his followers draw the attention from those who profit from the status quo. In this narrative context in John, “the world” (kosmos) symbolizes not God’s good creation but instead represents the systems of human institutions that thrive on cycles of fear and violence. It is “the world” that would prefer the darkness and shun the light (3:20). The “hour” has come for the “Human One” (CEB) to be glorified.

This glorification is a rich process. It will involve the judgment of the world that judges falsely (12:31). The world—again, the manifestation of human sin, in the form of Empire, corrupt institutions, etc.—will “lift” Jesus up as an example of what happens to those who dare uncover its hypocrisies, its oppression and injustice. Jesus will be lifted on the cross—the penal instrument of choice for the Roman Empire. And yet it is in this very moment of judgment that humanity’s attempt at “justice” will in turn be judged. God will expose the cross for what it is—an injustice, and will exercise power to subvert the intentions behind the cross and bring about resurrection. Jesus will be lifted, ultimately, through the resurrection. The resurrection will be the final word, the final judgment on the current “ruler of the world”—evil and death (12:31).

Jesus will press on the path of light, of love, of life, even when this existence causes a threatened world to lash out in violence, anger, and fear. Unless a seed falls and dies, buried and silent in the soil, there will be no further growth. The seed will remain, abide, alone. Yet when it dies to its isolated existence, life will abound and multiply. When a follower “dies”—chooses to relinquish—to a way of being that is dictated by the values of “the world,” she or he embarks on living the true life, abundant and flourishing (10:10). Who knows what God brings about from such a life!

This past Christmas Eve, my grandfather, a pastor in the Korean Methodist Church, passed away peacefully in his sleep. While celebrating his life of integrity and faithfulness, our family’s reflections turned to his mother, Deaconess Jung-Sook Lee. She was the spiritual seed of my dad’s side of the
family. Her courage to live as a disciple of Jesus changed the spiritual trajectory of her husband, her children, her children’s children—and by God’s grace, the fruits of her discipleship continue to ripen in my generation.

**Spiritual Seeds**

Born in 1907, my great grandmother grew up in a small, rural village in the midst of a brutal Japanese colonial rule. At a revival gathering held in the village, she committed her life to Christ. Despite her husband’s opposition (at times involving violence) great grandma Lee would take her children by the hand and continue attending church. In 1947, she and two other women began a prayer meeting in a small room provided by a local school principal.

When this school principal moved away, on a frigid February in 1948, great grandma Lee started a church in her own house, and called it Oh-Ga Church. This Methodist church continues to thrive as a community of believers today. Over the course of its history, this little country church produced a bishop, and many other leaders in the Korean Methodist Church.

Great grandma Lee’s six children all began their faith journeys under her guidance. Of the six, in particular, a son and a daughter(!) graduated from the Methodist Seminary. The son—my grandfather, would eventually serve as bishop. Even great grandfather Na, who initially sought to keep his wife away from church, repented of his ways and received Christ into his life. Great grandmother died young at the age of 49, after painfully struggling with cancer for many years, shortly after the end of the Korean War. In her living, however, and despite her death at such a young age, my great-grandmother became a seed of faith. It is flabbergasting to consider this soft-spoken woman’s grit and courage: women were not supposed to do what she did, back then, and with so few resources. God had a higher calling for her, and in response, great-grandma Lee died to the life her society, time, and place demanded of her. She chose to live unto God instead.

Jesus told his disciples that when he was lifted up from the earth, he would draw all people to himself (12:32). He sure did. The Jews, and the Greeks (Gentiles). Great grandma Lee was among those drawn unto him, and she, the first seed, brought a cluster of us along with her. Thanks be to God.

I don’t have a picture of great grandma Lee. She is said to have been a kind woman, who was known among her neighbors to be generous and caring. Older family members remark that I got my eyes from her. I’m happy to be a little sprout off her seed.

Who is your spiritual seed? Who are the women in your life who model discipleship for you and for others?
Sources consulted


Visual Source
What is women’s work? This notecard/poster by Mary Lynn Sheetz is an inspiring visual play on who is considered a “disciple” of Jesus. Many sermon illustrations will be found in the examples of these women. In different ways, the women featured here lived their lives to God and became as good as dead to systems of oppression, hypocritical status quos, and cycles of violence. Here is a collection of fruitful seeds: (from left to right) Dorothy Day, Mary Luke Tobin, Aung San Suu Kyi, Mary of Nazareth, Thea Bowman, Ita Ford, Priscilla (of the New Testament), Ruth Fitzpatrick, Catherine of Siena, Edith Stein, Rigoberta Menchu Tum, Teresa of Avila.

![Image of the notecard/poster](image_url)

*Used with the gracious permission of artist, Mary Lynn Sheetz, 2015. [www.alterni-tee.com](http://www.alterni-tee.com)*
WEEK 5: March 29, 2015

Lectionary Texts Used

The Passion of Christ Sunday
The cross was used by the Roman Empire to suppress any form of resistance against its rule, against its values, against its ways. Whatever and whoever would speak or act out against its grip would be violently silenced. They were silenced publicly, in a dehumanizing and humiliating fashion, as an example for any who dare harbor seeds of dissent. The tortured, beaten and stripped bodies were displayed on crosses lining the main roads leading into cities. These bodies were left out for the wild animals and birds to tear, rip and peck at, adding to the shame on these individuals and their respective communities. It was a fierce political weapon used by the powerful, by the ones who benefitted most from the status quo. The cross represents what humans do to one another, individually, societally, and systematically, in complex webs of fear, hatred, abuse and violence.

Right and wrong, innocence and guilt were determined by human authorities who had conflicting and self-serving standards of ethics. Jesus, who lived by a different compass point, manifested in his words and actions the blindingly brilliant realm of God and was, therefore, condemned for punishment. His teachings and ministry were too radical, upsetting and threatening to both religious and political authorities.

The passion narrative is a rich and disturbing tapestry of the human condition and the corruption of human relationships. The passion narrative is one of jealousy and deep insecurities (15:10), ignorance (15:14), cowardice, indifference, and neglect (15:15). Contempt and callousness are themes found throughout as well. We wince and grieve at such sadistic violence dealt out to any living being.

The Passion Narrative Plays out in 2015
The instruments of shame and death may have changed, but the gruesome reality of the “cross” persists. Our black and allied communities in the U.S. are still outraged by the double standards of “justice” we witnessed in Ferguson, where certain lives were deemed dispensable because of the color of their skin. The Boko Haram has massacred thousands of innocents. Their marauding armies are fronted by dispensable child soldiers who are trained to kill other children, women, and men indiscriminately. Over 200 female students from Chibok, who were abducted by this terrorist group, remain missing more than a year after their kidnapping. Many influential leaders in the Japanese government adhere to a revisionist approach to history which denies a history of “comfort

The Passion narrative pushes the Church beyond the privilege of remaining oblivious to the pain of our neighbors.
women.” In so doing, they minimalize the Imperial Japanese Army’s role in kidnapping 200,000 to 300,000 girls and women from occupied countries and forcing them into sexual slavery. According to the World Health Organization, one in three women will experience physical or sexual abuse during their lifetime, and gender-based violence against women continues to be one of the most common forms of human rights violations.

Crosses are strewn across towns, villages, cities and nations today. Bodies, beloved, exquisitely created, bearing the sacred image of God, are brutalized in many forms. In the busyness of daily living, many in our congregations are not present for Holy Week services. What is Easter if one skips directly from the triumphalism of Palm Sunday into resurrection? We must be reminded of the extent and horror of human sin that manifest in our midst. It is important for our congregations to name evil for what it is and to recognize its existence and prevalence.

We cannot begin to comprehend Easter joy and resurrection hope until we, as a Church, weep with those who weep and shake in anger at the injustices that bind and silence lives. In the hearing of the Passion narrative, we mourn; we repent of any complicity in the workings of oppression, and confess to our willful ignorance. For those in the Church who have been victimized in any way, the Passion narrative is an affirmation of the victim’s side of the story. Jesus knows, and understands. And when the Passion narrative is retold, the Church is galvanized to uncover the truth hidden in the victor’s embellishments, the perpetrator’s active erasing, the oppressor’s version of history. The Passion narrative pushes the Church beyond the privilege of remaining oblivious.

Creative Sermon Ideas
It will be difficult to preach from this Sunday’s text, as it is too long. For several years I have had dynamic readings of the Passion narrative in its entirety. Consider letting the drama of the story lead the congregation through worship and providing a brief theological framing for the congregation. You may also want to follow up such an intense worship with concrete recommendations for individuals, small groups, and/or the congregation to pursue as part of their response. It may be powerful to show carefully and thoughtfully selected images that coincide with the Passion reading as well. No matter what form of worship is created by the people of your congregation, instruct all to depart with the full understanding that God is on the side of the oppressed, and shares in their pain, even unto death.

May all know that God does not condone violence but would subvert the cross to expose the frailty of human systems of “justice.” This will set the tone for what is to come—Easter vindication of life.
Visual Resource:
The “Gallery” section of *The Peoples’ Companion to the Bible* includes an insightful collection of images related to the cross. The commentary provides a helpful lens in assessing the ideological assumptions behind religious images that we or our congregations may take for granted.

**How do you picture Jesus?**

**What various sources and traditions feed into your visual montage of Jesus?**

**How does this image of Jesus influence your understanding of the cross?**


Resources Consulted:


