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 abolition 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.