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.

**Author: Rev. Hyemin Na**

Hyemin Na, a cradle Methodist, is an ordained Elder in the Northern-Illinois Conference and is currently a Ph.D. student in Homiletics at Emory University. She is a graduate of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary (M.Div) and Harvard (A.B.). She is interested in exploring how preaching is done faithfully and well in our postmodern society, with an ear on the ground for the voices of religious "nones," and an eye out for visual culture. She makes her home in a suburb of Atlanta with a couple of old time prophets: Daniel, a fellow UMC Elder and spouse, and Elijah, of her womb.
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 fleshed 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.*