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 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.

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