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 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
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:

