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 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.*