A Woman's Lectionary

**Project Title: A Woman’s Lectionary**

**Core question:** How would a lectionary centering women’s stories, chosen with womanist and feminist commitments in mind frame the presentation of the scriptures for proclamation and teaching? More simply, what would it look like if women built a lectionary focusing on women’s stories? How is the story of God told when stories of women’s brutalization and marginalization are moved from the margins of canon and lectionary, and held in the center in tension with stories of savvy and strong women, women whose contribution is not limited to or does not even include childbearing?

**Project Summary:** In this project I will propose at least two new lectionaries, a year “W,” a women’s readings year that can be added to the current Episcopal or Revised Common (RCL) Lectionaries, and a new three-year cycle. Miriam Therese Winter’s three-volume lectionary and psalter is now almost thirty years old and lacks meaningful engagement with readers of color, as several unhelpful comments about slaves and slavery make it unusable for womanists and feminists committed to intersectionality. (*WomanWord*, 1990; *WomanWisdom*, 1991; *WomanWitness*, 1992). I propose to craft lectionaries that center the telling of the stories of scripture on the stories of women and girls in text whether they are named or voiced in the text and whether their experiences of and with God support the narrative and theological claim made by and on behalf of the text or not. A significant aspect of the work will be hermeneutical, interpreting texts far removed from the worship cycle of lectionary churches in light of Christian calendrical themes, and doing so honoring the ancient texts and their contexts, wrestling with their gender norms and discovering what happens when the stories are told in the pitch of women’s voices, (acknowledging virtually all of these texts are written by men). I will draw on my expertise as biblical scholar and Episcopal priest in this endeavor.

**Proposal Narrative:**

*Gender matters. Gender matters in the text, in the world, in the world of the text, and in the world of the translator. Gender matters to me and to countless numbers of women hearers and readers of the biblical text for whom it is Scripture. Gender matters significantly to those who*
have been and are marginalized because of gender, especially when it is done in the name of God, appealing to the Scriptures. And gender matters to men. Gender matters to hearers and readers of the Scriptures who are privileged to share the gender of the dominant portrayal of God, the majority of biblical characters, the majority of biblical characters who have speaking parts, the majority of translators of biblical texts, and the majority of interpreters of biblical texts. (Wilda Gafney, Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne, 289.)

Core Question: How would a lectionary centering women’s stories, chosen with womanist and feminist commitments in mind frame the presentation of the scriptures for proclamation and teaching? More simply, what would it look like if women built a lectionary focusing on women’s stories? How is the story of God told when stories of women’s brutalization and marginalization are moved from the margins of canon and lectionary, and held in the center in tension with stories of biblical heroines?

Rationale: There are more than two billion Christians in the world according to the Pew Research Center demographic projections (Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life, Global Religious Landscape, December 2012), 2.3 billion in 2015. With Roman Catholics making up an estimated 1.2 billion, and accounting for Orthodox Christians, Anglicans, Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and other Reformed traditions along with some Baptist and congregational churches that use a lectionary, the overwhelming majority of Christians receive their scripture mediated through a lectionary. Based on the numbers in the Pew Research Center’s 12 May 2015 report, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” as much as sixty percent of American Christians attend services in churches that use lectionaries. Those lectionaries are not simply as androcentric as are the scriptures, but in my experience as a congregant and priest, women are even less well represented than they are in the biblical text. For example, there are one hundred and eleven named women in the Hebrew Scriptures—which is itself under-represented in preaching lectionaries—not accounting for the numbers of unnamed women and girls.

Some thirty years ago Liturgist Miriam Therese Winter, MMS, published a trinity of feminist lectionaries. They were groundbreaking yet had their limitations, as did much of the white feminism that was not in dialog with womanism. The 1999 Remembering the
Women: Women’s Stories from Scripture for Sundays and Festivals was well received but is also dated. The online African American Lectionary Project developed by Martha Simmons, offers six years of reading and resources from 2008 to 2013 with a single reading for each Sunday, with the Sundays focused on cultural and spiritual observances in the African American community and African diaspora. Its single text makes it unsuitable for churches that require a first reading, psalm, second reading, and gospel reading. There have been other lectionary projects, i.e. the Narrative Lectionary which focuses on telling a single story over time. The Narrative Lectionary does not include many more women in its readings than the Roman Catholic, RCL or Episcopal lectionaries, it by no means centers women.

This project is important to me as a woman who preaches and presides and as a woman who hears the scripture read and preached to her. I have long been aware of the gender imbalance in the text and in its interpretation, including its curation in lectionaries. To the degree that biblical texts function as scripture for religious readers, it ought to be possible to tell the story of God and God’s people through the most marginalized characters in the text. To the degree that the bible is an androcentric document steeped in patriarchy, I expect a women’s lectionary to demonstrate and grapple with the gender constructs of the text rather than roll call or romanticize heroines.

The lectionary is a catechetical tool. All many congregants know of the bible is the texts they hear read from their respective lectionary. As a biblical scholar it is my hope to see congregants exposed to the bible more broadly and deeply, and see them equipped to engage the sacred texts of their tradition critically, with nuance. Biblical women are often generalized as a monolith of oppressed biblical womanhood. In my years teaching in theological classrooms and Jewish and Christian congregations, I find scripture readers unfamiliar with women prophets, (the subject of my first book, Daughters of Miriam: Women Prophets in Ancient Israel), or the more than twenty named Israelite and Judean queens preserved in the text, (addressed in my most recent monograph, Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne), or the female assassins who execute their would be rapists, or many other texts in which women have unexpected power and agency. Another significant aim of this project is increased biblical literacy.

This project is the creation of two different lectionaries, one a single year lectionary that can be added to current lectionaries, or substitute for one of the years, and an alternate
three-year lectionary that could potentially replace the current male-focused lectionary, or serve as an alternative to it. In order for this lectionary to be useable, it will have to conform to the current four-lesson structure of the RCL and Episcopal lectionaries and engage the liturgical themes of the Christian calendar. The primary work of this project will be to identify those texts and their potential liturgical applications. As a Hebrew Biblical scholar, I am concerned that Hebrew texts in Christian service be read in their own context, and will maintain the integrity of the Hebrew canon while making certain that it is not marginalized as is so often the case. As an Episcopalian, I will include Deuterocanonical/Apocryphal texts which are canonical to Catholics, the Orthodox, and Anglicans, (without which we would lose the longest prayer in the scripture by a woman and the woman who has the most speech in the canon, Judith).

Plan: The lectionary I propose will draw on feminist and womanist commitments to the full value of women and human beings in the story of the scriptures, fully created in the image of and in relationship with God, and the wellbeing of the whole community which extends from an expansive understanding of family to local and global communities and includes the environment. While designed for use in an American context, the lectionary will attend to the diversity of ethnic and national identities in the scriptures and the multifaceted identities of those who interpret the scriptures.

Specifically, I intend to do the textual and calendrical work myself in consultation with the Rev. Dr. Martha Simmons, founder of the African American Lectionary Project and with small working consultation groups of lay women and clergywomen from multiple denominations in geographical clusters in the US, Northeast, Southwest, West Coast, and Midwest. I have tentatively identified interested clergywomen in these regions. The funds would also provide travel funds to meet with my consultation groups and Dr. Simmons, and to compensate them for their time and labor.

Dissemination: This project is both an academic one and an ecclesial one, however its primary audience is the Church. My initial dissemination plan is in book form as the proposed lectionaries are hermeneutical in nature and will include exegesis, rubrics or reflections modeling how the texts can function together in light of the liturgical season or observance. Pending the agreement of a putative publisher I would also like to make the basic lectionaries, text selections and calendar, available online. Website development
would be a subsequent phase. I would also make the material available to congregations through presentations and workshops.

Impact: One anticipated impact of this project is what the patriarchal framework of the scriptures will look like when the textual exemplars focus on women. The extent to which women’s narratives uphold the patriarchal agendas if the scriptures will be held in tension with those passages in which women demonstrate agency, wielding power and authority. Sometimes those are the same texts. The degree to which the bible is and is not liberating will be more accessible. Biblical values and norms around gender will occupy a central place in biblical interpretation, providing greater opportunity for preachers to engage them and their impact on the construction of gender norms in the world in which these texts are interpreted. In addition, I believe it is crucial to reframe the texts so that women and girls are at the center of the story, even though they are to one degree or another literary creations of pre-modern men. It is important that women who are often second-class citizens in the text and in the world in which the text is interpreted have a text selection and reading paradigm that centers the interests and voices of women in the text, no matter how constructed. The task of preachers is to proclaim a word—of good news, of liberation, of encouragement, of prophetic power, of God-story. These lectionaries will provide a framework to do that which will attempt to offer some balance to the register in which the word has often been proclaimed.

Recent womanist and feminist biblical scholarship suggests this project would be well received: Mitzi J. Smith’s I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader (2015); the Society of Biblical Literature anthology edited by Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace, Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse, (2016); Suzanne Scholz’s revised Introducing the Women’s Hebrew Bible: Feminism, Gender Justice, and the Study of the Old Testament (2017), and the Wisdom Commentary series, the first feminist commentary treating the entire canon, (publication ongoing).

Timeline: I plan to do this work and complete it in calendar year 2019, pending academic release. I will have a research leave funded by my institution, Brite Divinity School, January to July of 2019. This grant would fund me from August to December 2019. I am asking for funds to secure a second semester for my research leave so that I can do this
work full time. I do not currently have another book-length or essay project scheduled for that time.
Bibliography:
The project is primarily exegetical, but not a typical academic work. I will be working with the biblical text directly. The parameters of this project do not call for engagement with secondary literature, hence the brief bibliography.


Freeman, Lindsay Hardin. *Bible Women: All Their Words and Why They Matter.* 2014.


TheAfricanAmericanLectionary.org


