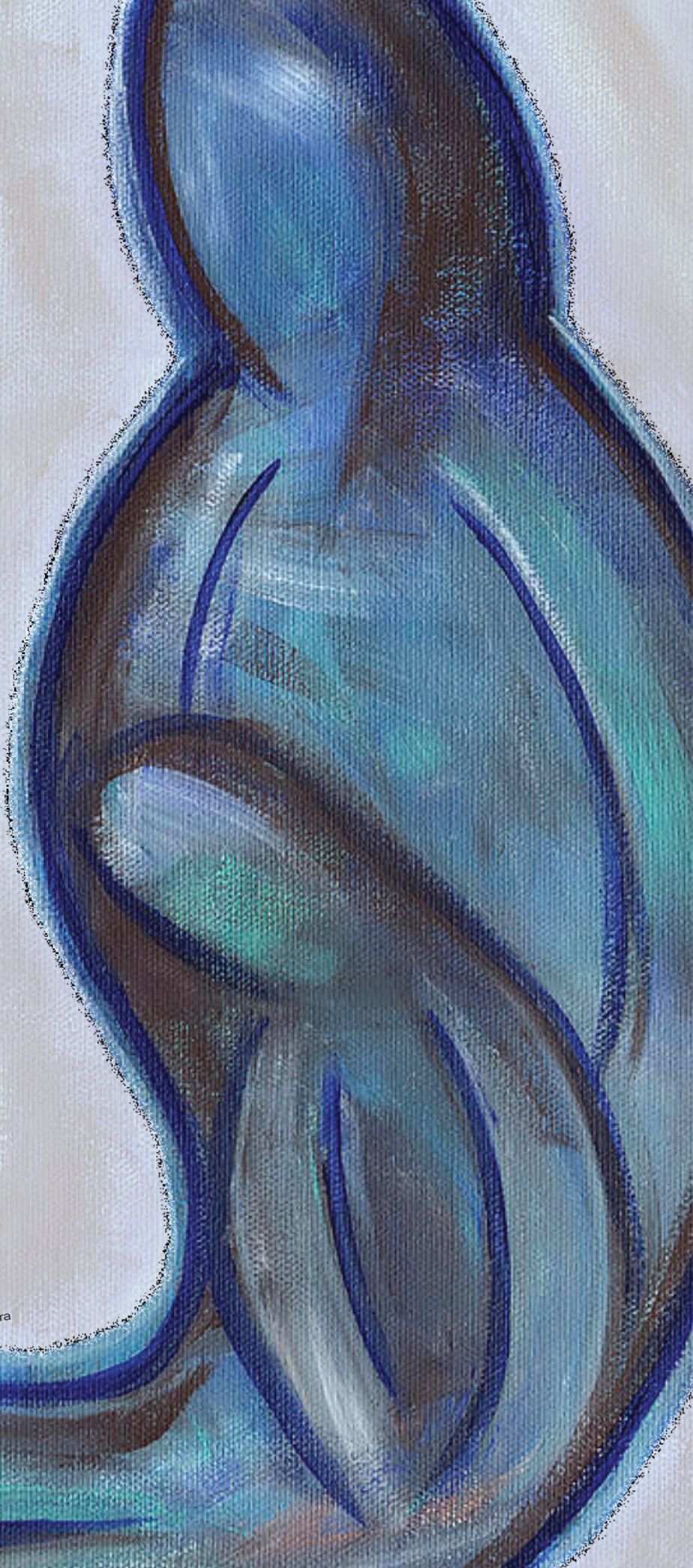


2022
CELEBRATE
THE GIFTS
OF WOMEN

*“And a Sword
Will Pierce
Your Own
Soul Too”*

BY RHASHELL D. HUNTER

Forever, Patricia Alexandra



Though Celebrate the Gifts of Women Sunday is March 6, 2022,
your congregation or women's group may use this resource on any day that you choose
to honor women's survival in challenging circumstances.

This year, we reflect on the circumstances of Jesus' birth and childhood, focusing especially on young Mary, who heard Simeon's prophetic words about the opposition Jesus would endure that Mary would also feel. We will consider how today's mothers, parents and families experience challenges surrounding the birth and/or care of children, including the impacts of the economic, political and racial climate of a community, state or country. We witness the power of God to overcome challenges, and we rejoice in the knowledge that there is nowhere we can go where Christ has not already preceded us.

In Luke 2:22–35, Mary and Joseph enter the temple with Jesus. A man named Simeon tells Mary “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed . . . and a sword will pierce your own soul too” (2:34–35).

Later in life, Jesus travels from place to place, preaching good news that the kingdom of heaven is near. Just like when he was a child, the young adult Jesus has to flee his own hometown after he preaches his first sermon there. This time they threaten him with deadly force, almost hurling him off a cliff.

How many times have mothers had their own souls pierced, seeing their children persecuted, threatened or killed? How many times have African American parents and parents of color watched the Christ in their child, the breath in their bodies, snuffed out by a bullet, viewed on a smartphone video posted on social media? George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Sandra Bland, Atatiana Jefferson, Merci Mack, Shai Vanderpump, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin and so many more.

Most of us have experienced difficult years with the Covid-19 pandemic, the disease of racism, as well as the unhealthy political and economic climate. We were essential workers in a global pandemic. We were scared to go out. We lost jobs in the economic downturn. Our unemployment ran out. Our loved ones were sick, and we were not allowed to sit with them in the hospital. Family and friends died, and we could not safely hold a funeral service for them. When schools closed, we became instructors or helped children or grandchildren navigate online school. We felt isolated, even trapped, while working from home. We did not want to wash another dish, launder another shirt or cook another meal. Our children graduated with no pomp and circumstance, left for college, and some were

infected with the coronavirus while far away from us. Our newborn babies have never met their grandparents, aunts or uncles.

Though this time was challenging, as people of hope we believed that suffering would not last forever. “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning” (Ps. 30:5b).

The world of Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus is a difficult and dangerous place, one with harsh conditions. Even so, I can see baby Jesus laughing and cooing, and his mother and father feeding him and rocking him. He will have plenty of time to prepare for the amazing work he will do, but there, in the manger, he sleeps, this small, helpless ruler of the world.

There is a lesson here. Those of us suffering from justice fatigue and sinking into despair after hearing the news of yet another African American sibling left to bleed out or to asphyxiate in the street; those of us losing a loved one to Covid-19; those of us who were sequestered at home will need to sleep, rest, renew our souls, then get back up again, because there is still ministry and work to do, and the church and the world need our witness.

Nothing on earth prepares Jesus' mother Mary for the day when her son is treated like a convicted criminal, sentenced to death and hung on the cross. “And a sword will pierce your own soul too,” Simeon says. This sword does find its marks. Jesus' side is pierced, and blood and water come out (Jn. 19:34). Mary is pierced and all her sorrow and misery pour out. The crucifixion is torture. Jesus eventually dies from asphyxiation, thirst and exhaustion, and he had done nothing wrong. Even Pilate says, “Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death” (Lk. 23:15b).

Mary continues her son's ministry as a follower of Jesus. At Pentecost, Mary and the disciples are all together and the Holy Spirit enters them all. I imagine when she died, she knew that she was promised life eternal and would see her son again.

Many women experience and survive challenging circumstances. In the midst of fear and despair, there is hope and joy. I can imagine that Mary saw the light of the world in Jesus' eyes. Rich and poor came to see him. Young and old were part of his ministry. Class and gender distinctions went away. Race—an ideological social construct anyway—did not matter. People from all around praised and followed the Sovereign One. And, the good news continues to be spread today that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world!

A Service in the Worship of God

Call to Worship

Based on 1 Samuel 2:1–10

One: My heart exults in God; my strength is exalted in my God.

All: There is no one holier than you. There is no Rock like our God.

One: God makes poor and makes rich. It is God who both humbles and exalts.

All: God raises up the poor from the dust; God lifts the needy from the ash heap, to place them among the mighty and promotes them to seats of honor.

One: God judges the ends of the earth.

All: God will endow the ruler with strength and exalt the head of the anointed one.

Suggested Hymns

“My Soul Gives Glory to My God” (Song of Mary)
(GTG¹ 99)

“For All the Faithful Women” (GTG 324)

“Mary and Joseph Came to the Temple” (GTG 148)

“Born in the Night, Mary’s Child” (GTG 158)

“Sing Praise to God Who Reigns Above” (GTG 645)

“Lord, Dismiss Us with Your Blessing” (GTG 546)

Call to Confession

God offers us the gift of forgiveness and the opportunity to let go of our wounds. In faithful witness to God’s grace and love, we confess our sins before God and each other.

Prayer of Confession (unison)

Loving God, we confess that we criticize and pass judgment on others. We have sought to control the way they live their lives of service to you. Forgive us for our shortsightedness and sin. Help us to understand, appreciate and love our siblings in Christ, who have diverse experiences and life challenges. Help us to recognize the variety of ways we can express our faithfulness and love to you.

Assurance of Pardon

Based on Galatians 4:4–7

One: God sent forth the Christ, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.

All: And because you are children, God has sent forth into our hearts the Spirit of God’s child, who calls out, “Abba!”

One: So you are no longer a servant but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

All: Thanks be to God.

Scripture Readings

1 Samuel 2:1–10

Psalm 139:1–14

Galatians 4:4–7

Luke 2:25–35

Sermon Starter

Getting Started

As you design your sermon, start with your questions about the scripture passage. For example, what does Simeon mean when he tells Mary that her child is destined to be a “sign that will be opposed”? Why does Simeon tell Mary, “And a sword will pierce your own soul too”? Notice that Luke does not record Mary present at the cross, though this is in John’s gospel. Nor does Luke record the piercing of Jesus’ side (Jn. 19:34), though, it is evident that Mary is to share in the pain of the rejection of Jesus.

In Preaching God’s Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary, Year B, Ruthanna Hooke observes, “It is notable that Simeon, when he sees the baby Jesus, says, ‘Lord, you now have set your servant free’ . . . Simeon’s words of freedom challenge us to examine in what ways we are enslaved to the ‘powers of this age.’ Are we enslaved to our possessions, to patterns of overwork, to addictions, to overconsumption, to ways of life that exploit others? These ways of being are not simply personal failings, but are the results of systemic forces that hold us captive. Christ offers freedom from these patterns of existence. This freedom takes the form, first, of recognizing our captivity, and second, of recognizing that in Christ the power of these forces is broken. As we accept

freedom, we begin to find ways to live in greater freedom from these captivating powers, while recognizing that our power to live in this new way comes not from our own efforts, but from God's gracious initiative."² How do Jesus' mother and father respond to Simeon's words? How shall we respond?

Sermon Forms

Consider shifting from your usual sermon form today. Try a narrative form or preach a story sermon, as the gospel passage easily yields itself to this sermonic style. In a story sermon, the preacher tells a story (for example, the story of Mary, Joseph and Jesus in the temple) without commentary, letting the story speak for itself. Ask questions and let your adult learners and children discover what the passage means for themselves.

Litany of Celebration

- One: God of Grace, thank you for tranquil, reflective moments when we are able to recognize you in the world. For all your beauty and your wonder, we give you thanks.
- All: **For the breath in our bodies, for our hearts and souls, for our connections with one another, we give you thanks and praise.**
- One: God of Reconciliation, be present with us when conflicts arise. Remind us that we have a higher calling, to forgive those who wrong us, to pray for those who persecute us, and to seek peace in the midst of strife.
- All: **For women who have survived challenging circumstances, for the faith and witness they have shared with us, we give you thanks and praise.**
- One: God of Love, we offer our gratitude to you for siblings in Christ who have comforted us and carried us in their hearts in prayer.
- All: **For those of all genders, ages and cultures, for our adoption as children of God and heirs to your promise, O God, we give you thanks and praise.**
- One: God of Creation, be present among us as we witness and serve, remember and reflect, sing and celebrate those, who with your help, guide the way for lives filled with gratitude. Amen.

Charge and Blessing

Based on Luke 2:25–35

- One: When Simeon sees the child Jesus in the temple, he takes him in his arms and praises God, saying, "You are now dismissing your servant in peace."
- All: **My own eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all peoples. A light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel.**
- One: May God's blessings be poured out to all of God's children.
- All: **May God's love and grace be upon us this day and forever more. Amen.**

Program Suggestions

Schedule an awards program in your congregation, presbytery or synod for Women of Achievement and Courage: women in professional leadership, women caring for children and families at home, women engaged in extraordinary service during the Covid-19 pandemic. Many women experienced challenging circumstances and demonstrated great courage in advocating for equitable health care, racial and economic justice, and support for children and families, often at great personal risk and sacrifice. These women may be humbled and surprised when they are recognized for their service and achievements. Your program also will provide others with inspiration and models for how they might engage in Christian service.

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Notes

1. GTG indicates *Glory to God!* The Presbyterian Hymnal. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013).
2. Ruthanna B. Hooke, *Preaching God's Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary, Year B*, Ronald J. Allen, Dale P. Andrews and Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, eds., (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 41–42.

Download this resource and additional materials in English, Spanish and Korean at pcusa.org/women.
