



Laura James, *Station No. 2*, 2013

Two Roads to Calvary

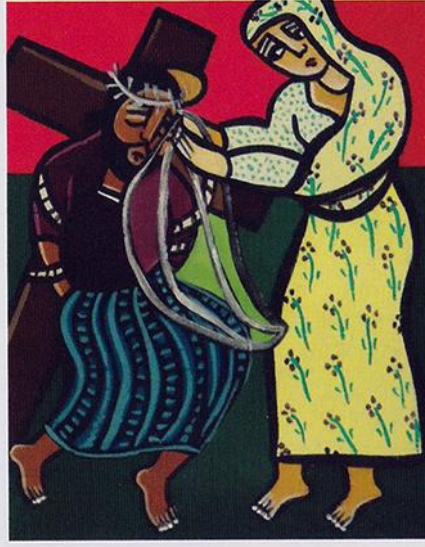


Laura Fissinger, *The First Fall*, 2019

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCHES are not known for displaying the Stations of the Cross—much less including them in their Lenten liturgies. This Lent, we plan to change all that. Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church marks the return of this 15th-century Christian tradition with a display of two artists' interpretations of the Stations, and an evening of devotion.

On Sunday, Feb. 23, the Arts & Our Faith Committee presents *Two Roads to Calvary*, an exhibition featuring two New York artists who are well known to the congregation—Laura Fissinger and Laura James. Fissinger's Stations were commissioned by the church to add to our sacred art collection. James' were created as part of a humanitarian effort to restore earthquake-damaged churches in Haiti.

Although their subject matter was the same, the artists traveled two distinct paths in depicting Christ's walk to Calvary. We invite you to read their stories. And join us on Tuesday, March 17, when we will pray the Stations together.



Laura James: 'A Reflection of the Creator'

In January 2010, a massive earthquake in Haiti killed an estimated 160,000 people, and damaged or destroyed nearly 300,000 homes and public buildings. In New York, a nonprofit organization, From Here to Haiti, was established to help the nation rebuild.

Laura James found a role for art in healing Haiti.

James, a Bronx-based artist, has had a longtime association with the Archdiocese of New York's Office for Black Ministry. Friends there connected her with From Here to Haiti and the work they are doing to restore churches. Patricia Brintle, president of the organi-

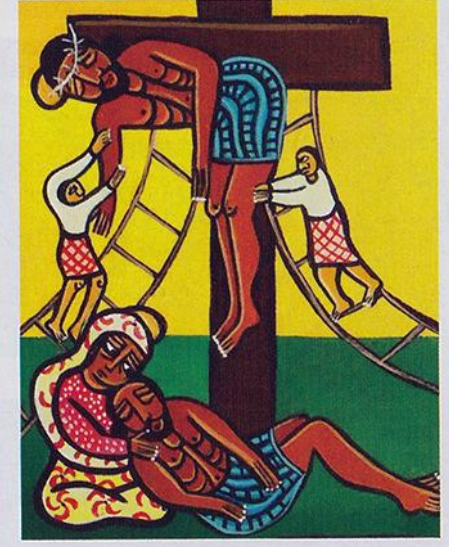
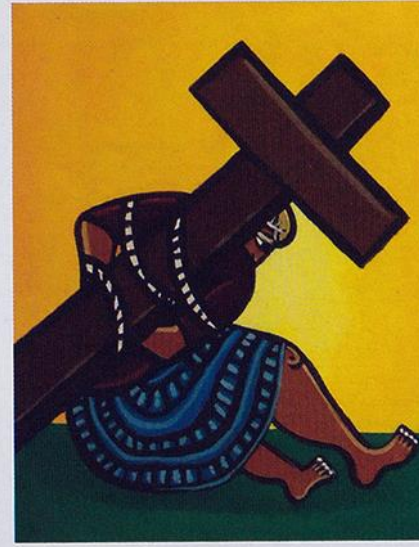


zation, recognized how James could contribute to the restoration of the Parish of St. Jean Baptiste in Sassier, a remote village in southwestern Haiti.

The parish serves a rural populace of 10,000 spread over 30 square miles. It is an area with few paved roads, sewers, electricity or other public services.

"Laura came up with the idea of bringing the painted Stations of the Cross to Haiti," Brintle says. "I thought it would be a great opportunity to bring sacred art that is culturally appropriate to the parish."

"Culturally appropriate" are keywords for James. Born to devout Antiguan par-



ents, James and her sister spent a lot of time in church, where she learned the stories of the faith from an Illustrated Children's Bible. She remembers the racial bias in those illustrations.

"More often than not, Christian art has been depicted from a Eurocentric point of view, and so excludes other ethnic groups from seeing themselves as a reflection of the Creator," she says. "In areas affected by poverty, where life is typically more physically and economically challenging, the need for spiritual elevation is important. Our goal is to offer parish members artwork that is more authentic and reflective of their community's valuable heritage."

James' Jesus is black-haired and brown-skinned, enveloped in the vibrant color of traditional African art. There is a fluidity to her human figures, each with dark, piercing eyes. It is a signature style that James has developed over more than two decades.

James was just 19 when she discovered

Jacques Mercier's *Ethiopian Magic Scrolls*, a 1979 text that documented an ancient form of indigenous art that drew from Christian and Muslim traditions. She began modeling her work after images that date from the fourth century.

Two examples of her work are on permanent view at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. *Sermon on the Mount*, commissioned by the church in 2016, hangs in Kirkland Chapel. And *Creation*, a gift of member Sheila Greene, is just outside the Chapel, above the stairway leading to the Christian Education Center.

As James developed her craft, she found an eager market among publishers looking for multicultural depictions of sacred stories. "I was lucky to sell my work very early on," she says, "to have a style that met a need for non-traditional religious images. But the art came first."

After James' Stations of the Cross depart Fifth Avenue, she hopes to accompany them to their next and final stop—Sassier.