

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
22 February 2026

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
First Sunday in Lent

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“The Good News is...So Good it Catches Us by Surprise”

First Sermon in *Tell Me Something Good: Grounding Ourselves in the Good News this Lent*

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

John 2:1-11; Matthew 13:31-32

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

What makes a surprise “surprising” is not necessarily the thing itself...it’s not **what** happens, but more so, **how** it happens or **when** it happens. It’s the unexpected factor of it all.

My best friend Beth and I were born about three weeks apart. My parents and Beth’s parents managed to pull off an awesome surprise 16th birthday party for both of us. Having a 16th birthday party wasn’t surprising either, it was our birthday after all and that’s what people do, celebrate. The people who were there weren’t surprising—it was close family and friends. The venue of the party itself wasn’t that surprising—it was a place we enjoyed going...one of those places with the big mats you can slide down and foam pits you can swing into.

But what made it surprising was the **date** of the party and the fact it was for both of us *together*. The date of the surprise was

pretty brilliant; it was halfway *between* our birthdays so neither of us was expecting it. My birthday had come and gone and I thought all the parties had been had to celebrate me. Beth’s birthday was not yet upon us so she wasn’t even thinking about parties yet. That’s what made the surprise, surprising!

What is surprising is not necessarily **what** happens, but more so, **how** it happens or **when** it happens.

What is surprising about the parable of the mustard seed is not that the kingdom of heaven is compared to something as strong, large, expansive, and protective as a tree. Nor is it surprising that birds make their nests in its branches. I think, on a very basic level, if you or I were asked to describe the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God on earth or something of God’s realm, we’d probably use words like

expansive, far-reaching, a place where we are safe, where we can feel at home, and be at home, a place where there is a community of nests, if you will. That all kind of fits.

The surprising thing about the parable is not the end result of God's kin-dom. The surprise is where it comes from. How it starts and how it grows. The kingdom of heaven doesn't start huge and big and far reaching from the get-go; it starts as something nearly invisible! As one of the smallest seeds imaginable. And, not only that, it's not like the seed goes "poof" overnight and becomes the tree. It has to be nurtured, sowed, grown. In other words, creating the kingdom of heaven is not magic. It takes work, effort, intention, care.

It makes me think of the circles of care and protection in Minneapolis that we are seeing. The ordinary citizens organizing to protect their neighbors from unlawful and unjust actions by ICE. Their approach is subversive and creative. They're using music as a form of joyful resistance, grocery delivery as an act of justice, carpooling kids to school as an expression of compassion and care, protection and provision. The people of

Minneapolis are growing God's kin-dom from a version of the invisible to the naked eye mustard seed to an extensive, branched network of activism. And the branches keep reaching further and farther. Their networks and organizing as a city are teaching the rest of us how to do it. Pretty cool.

We don't like to admit this necessarily, but I think we would prefer our kin-dom of God "pre-packaged" and ready to go. Our understanding of God's love and grace something that is ready-to-go, user-friendly, and easy for us to access and feel from the get-go. But faith isn't like that, is it? And neither is the growth of God's kin-dom. It takes a long time to grow. It's a slow process. Much of it is invisible and underground, hidden. And it starts so very small that most of us will not even notice it or know that it is there if we are not paying attention.

In his commentary on the New Testament, *True to Our Native Land*, scholar Michael Joseph Brown notes, "How God relates to and affects [God's] followers is like the sowing of the smallest seeds, which later flourish into vigorous shrubs. Black mustard is the most likely plant referred

to in this passage. It is the tallest of the mustards in [Palestine], reaching more than six feet tall. Black mustard was cultivated and used as a condiment and medicine...The message appears to say that something different from what you expect will flourish into God's kingdom. Inconspicuous beginnings can yield unexpected results."¹

The surprises just keep coming! The kingdom of heaven,—how God grows goodness and love in the world, is hearty and vigorous. It will take over like a weed, spreading fast and wild. And its “fruit” is likened to a condiment and a medicine. Meaning, the purpose of the kingdom of heaven is to make our life taste better (what is a hotdog without mustard, right?) and to *heal* us, to be a balm and salve for our wounds. The Gospel of Jesus flavors our lives and heals our hurts.

So on this first Sunday of Lent, might we fine tune our attention

a bit more to the mustard seed size moments in our days? The smallest of delights. The simplest of blessings. Can we nurture those with our attention and care until they grow and grow and begin to spread their branches and provide healing and care and ‘home’ not just for us, but for others?

Can even our seed of doubt be the thing that allows someone else to voice their doubt...to help them know that they, too, can find their home in faith, to know it's okay to question? Can our testimony of Good News, the way we see God working in the world this week be the thing that brings more flavor and joy to not just our day, but our neighbor's day too? What we feed and nurture will grow.²

What is surprising is not necessarily **what** happens, but more so, **how** it happens or **when** it happens, and perhaps, **who** makes it happen.

¹ Michael Joseph Brown, “Matthew 13:31-25, The Mustard Seed and the Leaven,” eds. Brian K. Blount, Gay L. Byron, and Emerson B. Powery, *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2024), pg 115.

² The parable of the mustard seed reminds me of the Native American parable from the Naticoke Nation: One evening, an elderly Cherokee brave told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, “My son, the battle is between two ‘wolves’ inside us all. One is evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy,

sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is good. It is joy, peace love, hope serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.” The grandson though about it for a minute and then asked His grandfather: “Which wolf wins?...” The old Cherokee simply replied, “the one that you feed.

Accessed on February 22, 2026 at <https://www.naticokeindians.org/about/the-tale-of-two-wolves/>.

It is not necessarily surprising, that Jesus performs a miracle at the Wedding at Cana. We, as people of faith 2,000+ years into this, know the entirety of the gospel stories. We know that Jesus performs miracles.

It is not really surprising that Jesus would have wanted to protect the married couple and their families from the embarrassment of running out of wine. Hospitality was a bigger deal back than it is even today. We know Jesus cares about people, so he would care, even for this newly married couple, that they were not ostracized or looked down upon for running out of wine.

What *is* surprising (to me, anyway) is that Jesus is at this wedding reception at all! And not just at the wedding reception, but he's there long enough for the wine to run out! He clearly has a later bedtime than I do! He's partying. Dancing! Enjoying himself! John tells us he was with the disciples. And his mom was there too! This paints a very different picture of Jesus than we're used to imagining. We normally think of Jesus as separate from family and friends, nomadically going town to town teaching and healing on

his own, sacrificing his own fun and joy for the sake of all of us, for the sake of the good news. But here he is partying and celebrating—*for the sake of the good news*. And he's even getting in a bit of a tiff with his mother, who is telling him what to do—and Jesus rolls his eyes and talks back a bit: “Mom, you're being annoying. It's not our problem. Let the wine run out.” But then, lo and behold, like most of us in our younger years who talked back to our parents and pretended like we didn't hear their advice or we thought it was stupid...we actually end up taking their advice and doing what they say. Jesus remedies the whole “wine is running out situation,” and he does so in a very surprising way.

What is *surprising* is that Jesus uses Jewish purification jars to make more wine. Giving us a sign that something about the kingdom of God that he is proclaiming is more about celebration and joy than it is ritual purification or rites and rules of the faith. There is something a bit overflowing and abundant about God's love and presence, and not just that, but that overflowing and abundant love, comes NOT through trying to make oneself better through

behavior, but making oneself available to be used by God.

British anthropologist, Ashley Montagu, said, “*The moments of happiness we enjoy take us by surprise. It is not that we seize them, but that they seize us.*”³

You know that feeling? The feeling of something you can’t control or make sense of with your mind or reason, but that washes over you and flows into your heart? Maybe gives you the chills or the giggles or even a sense of awe and wonder?

I think of the water to wine moment like this—it seized the whole banquet party and wedding party and all the guests with delight...and surprise!

Because what is *also* surprising in this text is that Jesus doesn’t present Trader Joes boxed wine, he conjures up an Italian vintage! This wine is the *good* stuff.

Jesus seems be saying through this miracle that the really, really good stuff—the best God has to offer—is for everyone at *any* time, even those of us who are “too drunk” to even notice, or know the difference. In other

words, God’s goodness, love, and grace are not dependent upon how good we are or whether we notice how good God is or whether we even thank God for being good to us. No, God is simply *good*. And whenever we catch on...well that’s when the party starts for us, maybe, but the party has already been rocking a long time. God’s party...the goodness of God is flowing all the time...we just have to be aware enough to tap into it. To notice it; to celebrate it. And it may be as small as a mustard seed some days, but its’ still there.

And that leads us to what is maybe most surprising of all about this text. That we are reading about the Wedding of Cana and Jesus turning water to wine and keeping the party going on the First Sunday of Lent. Pastor Anne, aren’t we supposed to be giving up wine and sweets and that type of stuff during Lent? Aren’t we supposed to be focusing on repenting our sins and thinking about our mortality and the things we need to change about ourselves during Lent?

³ Accessed on February 22, 2026 at <http://www.consciousnessparadigm.com/happiness-page/>.

Sure. That certainly that has a long tradition in the church and can be very fruitful in the Lenten season as we prepare to journey with Jesus to the cross.

And also, I don't know about you, but it feels like we are in a place in our country and world, and certainly as Christians trying to bear the name and heart of Christ in positive ways—where we need a little less *personal confession* about what *we're* doing *wrong* and a lot more *communal profession* about what *God* is doing *right*.

In other words, I think many of us are clear-eyed about our national, cultural, and personal moral failings right now. They are all around us in plain sight. Systemic racism. Blatant voter suppression. Celebrated white supremacy. A grotesque global cover up of abuse of women and children. The rise of Christian nationalism and the dissolution of the separation of Church and State. Stripping away the rights of queer people, trans people. Cruel, unjust, unlawful treatment of immigrants, of neighbors. Addiction to guns. Idolizing war, obsession with owning or controlling things, land, people. I'll stop there. Each of us has our own understanding of these moral

issues and how we have failed and perhaps how we must come together to rectify our wrongs...to stop the harm that is tearing at the fabric of our nation and communities. But these are not solutions that will come through a sermon series or through 40 days of personal reflection and confession.

But what we can do in 40 days is learn to profess our faith...with just a tad more confidence and clarity What do we stand for? What is the Good News that we believe in? Why are you here, on a Sunday morning, at church? You must still believe in something good to keep coming back. What is surprising about today, you could say, is that any of us are here at all...in church! When we could be jaded and skeptical and alone at home. Letting our doubt or fear keep us from worshipping or praising or finding a sense of belonging with others.

But there is “something good” here and that's why we're starting our Lenten journey through Jesus' ministry with John's gospel, instead of Matthew, Mark, or Luke's.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all begin the story of Jesus'

ministry with his 40 trying days in the wilderness, and his testing by the devil. John, however, begins the story of Jesus' ministry with joy and surprise and celebration at a wedding.

John is different. John surprises us.

It's no accident that John uses the phrase, "*On the third day* there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee..." *On the Third Day*. While Matthew, Mark, and Luke call us back to remember the 40 years of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness searching for the Promised Land when they mention the 40 days of Jesus in the desert with the devil, John calls us *forward*. John calls us forward three years to the end of Jesus' ministry, and even 3 days forward to the Resurrection of Easter Morning. The promise that while yes, there will be suffering and pain and loss and sacrifice and death—the whole point of all of it (of all of life and death and everything in between) is actually what happens on the Third Day—Resurrection. Joy. Delight. Hope. Fun. Abundance. Dancing. Partying. Community. Love. A sense of wonder at the miraculous. These moments in our lives—the moments of

celebration at wedding receptions—should not be the exception, they should be the rule. So John takes a regular everyday things and prefaces it with "On the Third Day" to remind us that we should be looking for "third day" moments every day of our lives.

This is not to say that life is easy. Not at all. It is to say that in the midst of the suckiness and suffering of life, we can yet still taste joy. Experience a bit of abundance. Delight in love. Smile. Laugh. Dance. And it's not something we just "try harder at." It's something we let 'seize us' or 'come to us.' Jesus shows us that where we look around our world and see that the wine is running out—where we see scarcity and that there is not enough for everyone—that God is in the business of providing the best abundance possible for *all of us* in unlikely places and possibilities.

And look, it's not that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are wrong to begin their gospels with Jesus' temptation and trial in the wilderness. They wrote their gospels much earlier than John did. They had more living memory of Jesus' life and ministry and are no doubt more chronologically 'correct' in

terms of what happened in what order in Jesus' ministry. But what makes John unique is that he is writing *decades* later. A *long* time after Jesus' life...somewhere between 85-100 A.D., but most definitely after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. It was a time of grief, loss, and conflict. He is writing from a point of trying to give his people hope in what the gospel is all about. Christians are being persecuted by this point. All the disciples have been executed, beheaded, martyred except for him. He's writing to an audience who is wondering, Was Jesus really the Messiah/'saving one' at all? Did his life, death, resurrection matter?

John theologizes everything. He uses a lot of metaphor and he speaks in signs and symbols to make meaning. John is the one who gives us all those great I AM statements about Jesus: I am the Bread of Life, the Good Shepherd, the Way, Truth, and Life, and so on. John knows that the point of his gospel is to tell people the core truths about *who* Jesus is and *why* it matters.

John writes his gospel in the present tense, *as if* it is all happening as Jesus is alive... *But* he writes it with decades of reflection and meaning-making

added into the mix. Hindsight is not really 20/20. It's not so much that we're seeing "perfectly" when we look back; it's more that we're seeing *clearly*—filtering out what doesn't matter and zooming in on what does.

It's not that John is saying Jesus *wasn't* tested and tried in the desert by the devil, but moreso that John is crafting his gospel to focus on and refract everything we are about to learn about Jesus through a "third day" lens. Transformation. New life. Hope. Joy. Rebirth.

John starts Jesus' ministry with the Wedding of Cana and turning water into wine because first and foremost, John wants us to learn and remember that the most important things we can profess about the Good News and God's kin-dom here on earth is that it is joyful, surprising, abundant, caring, hospitable, and really, really good—the gospel is the *good* stuff and it can come and surprise us at any point in our lives, even at points like the one's John's community was facing and we're facing today—times when suffering and sorrow seem like the only song there is to sing. John wants to give us a new song to sing...a

melody that will sustain us
through all that is to come:
The Third Day. The Third Day.
The Third Day. On all the hard
*days, remember **The Third Day.***

Rev. Lizzie McManus-Dail
writes:

“The good news is a surprise to us, of course, but it’s not a surprise to God...[the moment Jesus changes the water into wine], the party tips from good to unforgettable.

Behold: Jesus’ debut act of ministry. It’s not a healing, or an exorcism, or turning tables for justice. Jesus’ first act is to help ensure a party becomes the best party possible. It’s a total surprise.

Because this...*this is who Jesus is.*

Jesus doesn’t have to begin with defeating evil because he knows ultimately evil doesn’t stand a chance against a God who loves disco and his mother.

Evil doesn’t stand a chance against a God who is not only *not* afraid of scarcity, but laughs in the face of it. Evil doesn’t stand a chance against a God

who will never let an empty cistern or full tomb have the final word. Evil is predictable. But our God loves a surprise because God knows the plot twist is the same every time: God’s goodness will overflow. Every single time.”⁴

Scholar and Historian of Christianity, Diana Butler-Bass reminded me this week that Lent has been celebrated many different ways by many different types of Christians over the course of history⁵:

Our Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters...don't celebrate Ash Wednesday...They start Lent with something called *Clean Monday*. The emphasis in Orthodoxy is not on that we are notorious sinners...the emphasis is on preparing for the celebration to greet the Lord, preparing for the celebration of Easter. The idea is that we, as Jesus' followers, [need to prepare to see] him in all his glory face to face, as the Risen Lord. We need to clear the gunk out of our eyes, and out of our lives.

Christians in the earliest centuries prepared themselves

⁴ Rev. Lizzie McManus-Dail, “Commentary on John 2:1-11 and Matthew 13:31-32,” *Tell Me Something Good Sermon Planning Guide* (A Sanctified Art, 2026), pg 10.

⁵ Diana Butler-Bass, “Lent Begins: Go Fly a Kite (I’m not in the mood for ashes),” *The Cottage* (18 Feb. 2026), accessed on February 22, 2026 at

for the feast of Easter by fasting, usually for a couple of days. Diana notes that in the East, fasting is not considered penitence in the way that it is in the West; it's considered cleansing or purification. The idea is that you prepare your body, you cleanse your system of toxins and poisons and whatever it is that is polluting you. In order then to celebrate a great feast. Or enjoy a great wedding banquet ala today's text!

On Clean Monday, our Orthodox friends would do a variety of things: eat fruits and vegetables and whatever that was fresh and available, clean their houses, tidy up their environments. And then, it was a tradition developed out of Clean Monday to spend time with your family. The tradition grew to families gathering together to have a meal outside because you are supposed to also clean yourself from the pollution of having been inside. You go outside and spend time in nature. You're under the sky. You eat fresh foods. You immerse yourself in a different kind of environment.

And—get this!—from that, many Orthodox communities created a tradition of *flying*

kites! That's how they begin Lent! Not by smearing ashes on their foreheads to remind them of their mortality, but by practicing lifting their vision and spirits to the sky...by practicing looking up...so that they are prepared to feast with the Lord and recognize the goodness of his presence when they see it! Flying the kites prepares their line of sight; it changes what they pay attention to; it conditions their spirits.

Diana wrote quite candidly on her blog, “I don't need to be reminded that I'm going to die someday. I'm getting older. I know that. I don't really need to be told to do a whole lot of repentance or self-examination this year. I look around and I'm not the problem, frankly. I know that the church won't like to hear me say that, but that's the truth. I'm not the problem. The problem is the systems and structures in which we live have given rise to horrible sin and evil. And I have spent so much of my energy trying to stop that in the last few years and especially in the last 15 months...I definitely don't need to be told that I'm the problem right now with the fact that the world is full of sin and evil.

No, I'm not the problem. *I'm part of the solution.* I'm part of the love that is coming forth from the heart of my own faith and saying No to the evil.”⁶

So let's use Lent as a season of creative and cleansing preparation in order to be face-to-face with love on Easter morning, to be “with God in full union with God's community and all of God's people, where we in our own bodies carry around paradise as a living icon to the mercy, love, forgiveness, and compassion of Christ—*That's Lent.*”⁷

Interestingly, in the *beginning* of Christianity, people thought of the faith as paradise... “paradise coming to earth, an entirely new way of living, even with the shadow of death still haunting, even with the realities and suffering of human life surrounding...there was at the heart of it a vision, a glowing, gorgeous, beautiful, pulsing vision of light and generosity and all-consuming love. And that is what the church was supposed to embody. That is what we carried around in our bodies.”⁸

That's why purification and preparation are the focus—“to clear the dross so that we can see the glory that is all around us, to feel it, to live into it, to embrace it, to let it shine in and through each one of us.”⁹

This Lent let's purify. Let's to pray for our world. Let's claim what we believe and live by it. Let's prepare so that we ourselves are able to receive the fullness of the light and love of the Risen Christ, so that we are ready when the tomb is empty and when Mary Magdalene turns around and Jesus calls her by name, we recognize *our name* in Jesus' voice too. Preparation is needed for such a shocking, incredible, surprising, wonderful proclamation: *Christ is risen. Christ is alive.* That is the surprise of all surprises, is it not? That life defeats death!? That death does not have the last word. We've got to prepare to speak this truth and joy with all that we have.

This may be a surprising take on Lent for us, perhaps. But not for the earliest followers of Jesus. Not for the Orthodox, not for the readers of John's gospel. The ones who were introduced to Jesus not as a babe born in

⁶ Butler-Bass, *ibid.*

⁷ Butler-Bass, *ibid.*

⁸ Butler-Bass, *ibid.*

⁹ Butler-Bass, *ibid.*

Bethlehem but as, “*the True Light that shines in the darkness, the Light that the darkness cannot overcome,*” (John 1:4, 5, 9) and as “*the Word made flesh who came and dwells among us...so we can see his glory, full of grace and truth.*” (John 1:14).

This is *good* news, and it is worth grounding ourselves in, preparing ourselves for, and practicing how to proclaim it.

To Goodness of God is not a surprise to God. So let’s do our part to ensure it’s not a surprise to the world either, or even, to ourselves.

Amen.

Tell Me Something Good Moment:

We are fairly well versed in talking about negative things.

We complain about our work colleagues when we’re at home with our family, or we complain about our families when we’re at work with our colleagues.

We bond with neighbors and strangers over the latest news story or trauma, saying “*Did*

you hear...?” or “*Can you believe...?*”

Even in prayer request time in our small groups at church, we are more likely to lead with our health ailments and struggles, the things that are going wrong in our world and in our life, rather than leading with the joys and celebrations we want to thank and praise God for.

And I think even, many of us are a bit hesitant and reticent to talk about our faith or our church with others because we wonder what people will think about us, as ones who still believe in God given all that is happening in the world.

This suggests, perhaps, that we could use some practice talking about the Good Stuff of Life.

So in Lent we’re going to practice what we preach by “telling each other something good.” The prompt will be slightly different each week, but the point is simply to end the service on a high note, reminding ourselves of the goodness of God and the good things in life and to have some fun with it. You’ll love the theme music that undergirds your sharing!

As the music is playing, find a few people and share something good that happened in your life this week. Anything. Don't overthink it. This week I got to do laundry on my preferred laundry day...Friday. It just makes my week go smoother when I can do that, and the last 2 weeks I couldn't...so yeah, that's my good thing this week: Laundry day, my way.

You can share with someone next to you, but also try to find someone a few pews over or back. Break out of your comfort zone a bit. Share your good thing with 2-3 folks.

When the music stops, that will be your cue to return to your seat.