

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro  
17 November 2024

10:30 a.m. MT Worship  
Commitment Sunday

Calvary Baptist Church  
Denver, Colorado

## ***“Midwives of Goodness”***

Fourth Sermon in the Stewardship Series, *Giving for Goodness*  
Part of the Annual theme, *Thriving in Goodness for Good and for GOOD*

*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.*

### ***Mark 13:1-8; Hebrews 10:23-25***

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

Whew. Anyone ever feel like you are living in the pages of scripture?

The gospels were written decades after Jesus’ life. Mark is believed to be the earliest gospel writer. He wrote in or around the year 70 CE. If you know your history, you know this is the time when the Temple in Jerusalem did in fact come tumbling down.

Mark is writing during a time of war and destruction. So if his words seem gloomy or ‘doomsday-ie’ that’s not because he’s some dystopian science fiction writer; it’s because the literal stones of the beloved Temple—the center of the community and the place where God’s *Shekinah*, or Spirit/Presence was believed to have dwelled, the building that represented all that was stabilizing in their life as an oppressed people living under oppressive rule—was decimated

by the Roman Empire. So though Mark is remembering and recording a conversation that Jesus had with his disciples decades earlier in 33 CE-ish, now in the year 70 CE-ish, this text, as Mark remembers it and writes it, has a very different tone and impact for his readers than it would have for Jesus’ disciples.

Jesus is not offering them a way out of the pain that is raining down all around them. Jesus is not giving a three step plan to an easier more prosperous life; he’s not saying, “if you just hold fast to my teachings and believe without doubt and help the poor and pray and go to church and love your neighbor, THEN the Temple will not fall and wars will not break out and people won’t go hungry.”

No. Jesus is saying (through Mark), “This is real, folks. This is all happening. Right here and right now. Look around. See it

for what it is. Be present. Don't turn away. Don't be alarmed or shocked. And don't blame this all on God either!

Author Zora Neale Hurston writes in the chapter that gave her novel its name, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, about characters Janie, Tea Cake, and Motor Boat who are seeking refuge inside as they watch a raging hurricane outside: *"The wind came back with triple fury, and put out the light for the last time. They sat in company with the others in other shanties, their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God."* (Ch. 18)

Indeed, sometimes it feels like the Light has gone out, that all we have is each other as we stare at the world's evil and turmoil, thinking we are seeing God at work, wielding destruction in some kind of way to teach us a lesson...but what if the destruction is not God's way, but our ways? What then? At what point do we face our circumstances and stand, shoulder to shoulder, as we watch all that we thought was real and true in the world, all

that we thought was fixed and firm, come tumbling down? Not alarmed, but awake. Awake to the reality of what *is happening* and what *has been happening* for a long time. Awake to the consequences of our own actions and the actions of other humans like us?

We could re-write this text for our own day, couldn't we?

Jesus is saying, "Be alert...things are being thrown down, stone by stone." We might think of this literally like the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 or the twin towers on 9/11—or metaphorically as we see leadership appointments being made this week in our government of folks who say they're going to do away with things we didn't even know could be done away with.

Jesus is saying, "Beware... People will use my name to get power, claiming to be able to 'save you' when in fact they only want to save themselves." We think of politicians who run on the platform of Christian Nationalism, or Christian Zionism, or Self-promoting Ego.

Jesus is saying, "Hold on; wars are happening, and people will

threaten more wars—grabbing at power and land, land and power.” We think of the bloodshed in the Middle East: the 1,200 Israelis killed by Hamas on Oct. 7, 2023, and since then the 500 more Israelis killed and the 42,000 Palestinians killed—70% women and children—and 97,000+ Palestinians wounded, and 1.9 million displaced in Gaza (by conservative estimates).<sup>1</sup> We think of the one million Ukrainians and Russians who have been killed or wounded since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Or how in the first half of 2024, three times as many people died in Ukraine as were born.”<sup>2</sup> We think of the reality that “since civil war broke out in Sudan in April 2023, at least 61,000 people have been killed in the Khartoum State alone,<sup>3</sup> 7.7 million are internally displaced,<sup>4</sup> and 2.1 million others have fled as refugees.”<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, Jesus is saying, “Take note, kingdom will rise against kingdom, sometimes within one nation!” We can’t help but think of the internal divisions in the U.S.—the stark divide of the kingdoms of political parties that use capitalism to gain profit, rather than compassion to protect people—agendas rising against agendas.

Jesus is saying, “the ground is splitting and hungry bellies will stay empty.” We think of the devastation from earthquakes in recent years in Turkey and Syria, Afghanistan, Haiti, Indonesia, and Nepal—the flooding from Hurricane Helene here in the U.S.—the 96% of the population in Gaza who are facing such acute food shortages that even if some survive, the effects from this season of malnutrition will adversely affect their health and brain development their entire lives.<sup>6</sup> We look around in our own neighborhoods, noticing the over 47 million people in the

<sup>1</sup> Reuters, “41,788 Palestinians killed in Gaza offensive since Oct. 7, health ministry says,” *Reuters.com* (3 Oct. 2024), accessed on Nov. 17, 2024 at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/41788-palestinians-killed-gaza-offensive-since-oct-7-health-ministry-says-2024-10-03/>.

<sup>2</sup>Mersiha Gadzo, “Record high deaths in the Russia-Ukraine war: What you should know,” *Aljazeera.com* (16 Oct. 2024), accessed on Nov. 17, 2024 at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/16/russia-ukraine-wartime-deaths>.

<sup>3</sup> Sudan Situation: UNHCR External Update #68, 28 June – 4 July 2024”. *reliefweb*. 5 July 2024, accessed on Nov. 17, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> “IOM Sudan Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) Sudan Mobility Update (2) Publication Date: 11 June 2024”. *reliefweb*. 11 June 2024, accessed on Nov. 17, 2024.

<sup>5</sup>Yibeltal, Kalkidan; Rukanga, Basillioh (14 November 2024). “Sudan death toll far higher than previously reported - study”. *BBC News*, accessed on Nov. 17, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Devastating New Figures Reveal Gaza’s Child Hunger Catastrophe (25 June 2024), accessed on Nov. 17, 2024 at <https://www.savethechildren.org/us/about-us/media-and-news/2024-press-releases/devastating-new-figures-reveal-gazas-child-hunger>.

United States who face hunger, including 1 in 5 children.<sup>7</sup>

Just as we can relate today to Jesus' words, Mark's readers could too. They were in the throes of shock and survival as war broke out around them and they watched their beloved buildings destroyed, their understanding of community decimated, their access to food denied, their families dispersed, their beliefs ridiculed, their bodies enslaved and tortured.

Even more, the Temple embodied their hopes and the dreams. The temple represented to the Jews God's permanence, God's promise, God's stability among them. Even though the Temple had fallen before, that was out of this generation's living memory, so it was 'unthinkable' to them that the Temple could fall. The Temple was all they had; it could not fall because if it did that would mean that God has completely deserted them and abandoned them. It was unthinkable. And yet. That's exactly what happened.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps you find yourself—due to circumstances in your own life or health or family or due to circumstances in our country or world—facing the very same reality: “the unthinkable” (whatever you think *that* is) that could never happen to you, has actually happened, or is now actually happening. This is how Mark's readers would have felt.

It helps us to understand the devastating nature of this text if we understand that it is an apocalyptic text.<sup>9</sup>

An “apocalypse” is an *unveiling* or an *uncovering*. A disclosure of something secret and hidden that is now exposed in a new way. To experience an apocalypse is to experience fresh sight. Honest disclosure. Accurate revelation. It is to apprehend reality as we've never apprehended it before.”<sup>10</sup>

In 2016, American author and social activist Adrienne Maree Brown wrote the following in reference to racial injustice and the Black Lives Matter movement: “*Things are not getting worse, they are getting*

<sup>7</sup> Accessed on Nov. 17, 2024 at <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america>.

<sup>8</sup> Diana Butler Bass, “Sunday Musings: The Rock that Births You,” *The Cottage* (17 Nov. 2024), accessed on Nov. 17, 2024 on [dianabutlerbass@substack.com](mailto:dianabutlerbass@substack.com).

<sup>9</sup> Mark 13 is often called the “little apocalypse” in comparison to the books of Daniel and Revelation.

<sup>10</sup> Debie Thomas, “Not One Stone,” *Journey with Jesus* (11 Nov. 2018), accessed on Nov. 17, 2024 at <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2010-not-one-stone>.

*uncovered. We must hold each other tight and continue to pull back the veil.*"<sup>11</sup> This is what Jesus is saying Then. And Now.

Jesus is saying, "God is not bound by mortar and stone. God exceeds every edifice, every institution, every mission statement, every strategic plan, and every symbol human beings create in God's name.

Moreover, God is not enslaved to superlatives; *we're* the ones easily seduced by the biggest, the newest, and the shiniest. "*Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!*"<sup>12</sup>

"In her sermon collection, *God in Pain*, Barbara Brown argues that disillusionment is essential to the Christian life. 'Disillusionment is, literally, the loss of an illusion—about ourselves, about the world, about God—and while it is almost always a painful thing, it is never a bad thing, to lose the lies we have mistaken for the truth.'<sup>13</sup>

I wonder:

- What lies and illusions do we mistake for truth?

- In what memories, traditions, or comfort zones do we attempt to "house" God?
- On what shiny edifices do we pin our hopes, instead of Jesus? (Church? Political party? Family? 401K?)
- Why do we cling to permanence when Jesus invites us to evolve and change?
- Are we willing to sit with the fact that things fall apart? Things we love, built, cried/prayed/strived for?...even the body or mind we have worked to nourish and strengthen with our whole life? What happens when it, too, fails us and falls apart?
- Can we embrace a journey of faith that includes rubble and ruin?<sup>14</sup>

These are heavy questions, but we cannot read a text like this one, nor can we live in the state of our country and world today, and not ask ourselves: *What veil is being pulled back? What is being uncovered? What is God revealing to us in the midst of this rubble and despair?*

This is ultimately the challenge of living in apocalyptic times, that is, times where God is

<sup>11</sup> Thomas, *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Thomas, *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Thomas, *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Thomas, *ibid.* (Questions adapted)

revealing or unveiling something new—which you could say is *all the time*. The challenge is to live and breathe and BE within *these* times, and not be overcome or destroyed by them. The challenge is to remain tethered to our goodness and to the good that is in the world and in others and in ourselves, despite all that is not good that is causing things to tumble and fall. But maybe stuff needs to crumble and fall. Because...something is “struggling to be born.”<sup>15</sup>

Jesus says, “*this is but the beginning of the birth pangs.*”

And there it is. Just like that. The Good News.

Where there are birth pangs, *there will be birth*. And giving birth is called “labor” for a reason. Giving birth literally involves pushing life through a passage way that otherwise by all appearances is way too narrow, small, and closed off for a baby to emerge. Nothing about giving birth makes sense or feels possible, until...it is. And the first expression of life is not a laugh but a cry. The body has a miraculous way of breathing and relaxing into expansion that

allows for new life to emerge. But it’s not without labor. It’s not without pushing. It’s not without tears. It’s not without guttural grunts and screams. And it’s not without midwives.

Midwives, accompanying people giving birth. They are coaches and inspirers, they offer pragmatic tools for managing breath, and a hand to squeeze when the pain is excruciating. Midwives are not just present for the moment of birth, but for the entirety of the journey of birthing...including the weeks preceding the birth, the labor of delivery, and the weeks following the birth. Midwives do not run from the pain they are seeing the person in labor endure, they remain present and helpful, giving the laboring one tools to breathe and endure through it...producing life.

Calvary, when Jesus says, “*this is but the beginning of the birth pains*” he’s inviting us to do two things. First, to realize that something new is coming. Something will rise up from the rubble. Something is being created and birthed. Second, he’s inviting us to remain in the labor, to remain in the pain (not run from it), and to be midwives

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas, *ibid*.

for goodness in the midst of  
evil, midwives for hope in the  
midst of despair, midwives for  
joy in the midst of pain,  
midwives for peace in the midst  
of war.

Dreams rise from the rubble.  
We are experiencing the birth  
pangs of these dreams, for sure.  
And, in those birth pangs, our  
labor is bringing about Good in  
the world, but not just by our  
own good deeds or labor, but by  
the labor that we witness and  
join alongside and fund and  
encourage and do together. The  
labor for which *we* are  
midwives.

Calvary, we are midwives for  
goodness because we play a part  
in a larger whole that impacts  
the world in significant ways.  
We understand that goodness  
doesn't just happen by  
individual actions; it requires  
communal labor. Even in,  
*especially in*, difficult times.

We are midwives for goodness  
when we bring peanut butter or  
water bottles for the Blessings  
ministry, or when we offer our  
presence as a listening ear on  
Mondays to those who walk  
through our doors.

We are midwives for goodness  
when we stay overnight hosting

families experience  
homelessness for Family  
Promise, or cook up a big meal  
to feed them, or take home  
bedding to wash after their stay,  
or drive their cots and luggage  
to the next host site.

We are midwives for goodness  
when we talk openly about  
racism and proactively work on  
discovering our implicit biases  
through Facing Racism.

We are midwives for goodness  
when we read with third graders  
at Stedman Elementary, joining  
with other volunteers from New  
Hope—creating impact for the  
students and developing  
relationships across diversity.

We are midwives for goodness  
when we show up for worship  
and simply by our presence,  
witness to the person in the pew  
behind us that they are not alone  
in their journey—that other  
people, too, are here seeking  
spiritual hope and a place of  
service and meaning, or perhaps  
even a place of healing.

We are midwives for goodness  
when we support global servants  
who are helping local leaders  
develop sustainable rain water  
collection systems to water their  
crops.

We are midwives for goodness  
when we partner with  
pediatricians to ensure all  
families have gun locks in the  
home through organizations like  
Colorado Faith Communities  
United to End Gun Violence.

We are midwives for goodness  
when we engage in a small  
group or church school class  
and ask questions about our  
faith, or share our vulnerabilities  
and doubts with others—  
creating an authentic, shared  
space for deeper learning and  
faith formation.

We are midwives for goodness  
when we convene as deacons to  
balance budgets and dream big.

We are midwives for goodness  
when we dress up like Cookie  
Monster or decorate our car  
trunks to hand out sugar and  
smiles to children in our  
neighborhood—or enjoy fun  
and fellowship with the Men's  
Group—teaching folks the  
important spiritual practice of  
joy and fun!

We are midwives for goodness  
when we drop off dinner for  
someone recovering from  
surgery, when we write an  
encouraging note to someone,  
when we knit a prayer shawl or  
make prayer beads.

We are midwives for goodness  
when we share a livestream link  
of a particularly inspiring  
sermon with a friend.

We are midwives for goodness  
when we host partner  
organizations in our building  
that serve adults with  
disabilities, that allow our  
fellow Coloradans to vote, that  
empower young women with  
leadership skills through  
basketball, that hone the voices  
of children so they can sing  
goodness into the world.

We are midwives for goodness  
when we offer our gifts in  
worship—whether singing in  
the choir, or ushering, or  
reading scripture, or sharing our  
story—creating a space where  
many stories and lives inspire,  
and not just a few.

We are midwives for goodness  
when we ensure our restrooms  
have toilet paper and our water  
fountains can fill up water  
bottles and our Keurigs have  
coffee pods—offering  
hospitality and ensuring  
wellness of body, not just soul.

We are midwives for goodness  
when we care for babies in the  
nursery so they grow up  
knowing the church is a place  
that holds them, nurtures them,



loves them, learning from an early age that God is Love.

We are midwives for goodness when we inter the cremains of saints in our Foot of the Cross Courtyard, providing beautiful rituals of remembrance and meaning for families who are grieving.

We are midwives for goodness when we run cables so that our Wi-fi, or when we cut up fallen tree limbs and remove them so the playground is safe.

We are midwives for goodness when we pray with congregants before or after surgery, or when drive them to and from doctor appointments, or when we linger a bit longer when we are visiting VIPs.

We are midwives for goodness when we show up at PRIDE wearing a shirt that says, “You are loved” revealing a message of inclusivity and love that is so very needed in a community where the Church has all too often been a voice of hatred and exclusion.

We are midwives for goodness when we disagree with one another, yet love one another—recognizing that there is more we can do together than we can

do alone and that sometimes our disagreements lead to deeper discernment.

We are midwives for goodness when we champion our youth and their endeavors and when we listen to our seniors and honor their wisdom.

We are midwives for goodness when we support and ordain women to ministry, gay folks to ministry, trans folks to ministry—celebrating all the ways God has gifted God’s people.

We are midwives for goodness every time we approach a conversation with a Spirit of Curiosity and risk our own comfort or privilege to be *Open to All, Closed to None*.

Calvary, we, together, as a community are midwives to goodness. We are here, day in and day out, breathing with and journeying with people in our congregation and partners within the community and missionaries around the world to birth goodness—through painful labor and impossible realities—we show up and we speak out and we hold sacred silence too—together.

We are midwives for goodness!

Perhaps you are thinking, “*if this is but the beginning of the birth pangs,*” then 1) What exactly are we birthing? And 2) how long will we be in labor?

Well, I can’t answer the second question, but I can answer the first.

We are birthing the kin-dom of God. On earth as it is in heaven. Did you know that of the four gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—Mark’s is the only one that does not have any kind of narrative about Jesus’ birth?

Matthew and Luke have narratives about the human family into which Jesus is born—the stories of Joseph and Mary, the journey to Bethlehem, the visit of the Magi; and John has a whole chapter on the cosmic beginnings of Jesus as the Word who was with God and the Word who was made flesh among us. Matthew and Luke speak of Jesus’ human experience. John speaks of Jesus’ divine origins.

What’s up with Mark? Why doesn’t he have a birth story?

Well...perhaps he does. As Diana Butler Bass so astutely

observes, “*Mark’s gospel has no nativity narrative because the entire gospel is a nativity narrative.*”<sup>16</sup> Mark’s gospel is about the birth of Jesus’ message and ministry: *the kin-dom of God*. On earth as it is in heaven.

Mark’s nativity story is his entire gospel: and it is all about the labor pains surrounding the birth of the kingdom of God, including the suffering we’ll endure: “How we will pass through this stage to the next stage. How we are going to move through the birth canal from this time of suffering to the Kingdom...that time when God’s presence will shine through the whole of the earth like a light that never goes out. When the glory of God will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. When the new Jerusalem, where there will be no more tears, will come and there we dwell forever. Where God will make God’s habitation in human hearts.”<sup>17</sup>

“*This* is the birth narrative that Mark cares about. This is the *advent* that Mark cares about. And you know what Mark tells us? Birth is hard. The passage through the birth canal—the

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<sup>16</sup> Butler Bass, *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Butler Bass, *ibid.*

move from one age to another, from the death of the old into the beginning of the new—will be marked by and attended with suffering.”<sup>18</sup>

“C.S. Lewis [who wrote during World War II] referred to God once as “the one who shatters.” The birthing God is a shattering God. Anyone who has ever given birth knows this. Diana Butler Bass says, “I’ve only done it once, but I remember lying in that hospital room with the beautiful baby. That’s the part we love to talk about. [But I remember what it took to make that dream possible...]: my body was shattered. It would never be the same body that I had before birth. That’s the work of God. The one that shatters in order for [new life to emerge].”<sup>19</sup>

“And that’s what Mark has been saying to us all year: *a new world is being born*. And it may feel to you like everything that is stable, everything that is permanent, everything that once housed the presence of God, that it’s all being destroyed. That’s the birth. The shattering of this age happens so that a new one will be born.”<sup>20</sup>

*“This is the beginning of the birth pangs...”*<sup>21</sup> So in these birth pangs, let us be midwives for goodness, Calvary!

Hebrews 10:23-25 encourages us with tools we can use as midwives for goodness: We can thrive through the birth pangs of change, disruption, and uncertainty when we use our gifts to bring into reality God’s dream. When we choose to hold fast to our faith despite wanting to let go in fear. When we choose to provoke one another to love and good deeds, rather than provoke each other in anger. When we choose to keep meeting together even though sometimes all we want to do is crawl in bed and pull the covers over our head. When we choose to encourage one another, rather than pulling away from each other.

Today on Commitment Sunday, there is no better time than to come together in our labors, and to breathe and be with one another and with our community, as we birth goodness into the world.

When you give to Calvary, you are a midwife for goodness in the world. We cannot do what

<sup>18</sup> Butler Bass, *ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> Butler Bass, *ibid*.

<sup>20</sup> Butler Bass, *ibid*.

<sup>21</sup> Butler Bass, *ibid*.

we do without you. And the God cannot do what God dreams to do for the world, without Calvary.

As the author of Hebrews writes to his people, the Day is approaching...what is that Day? The day the kin-dom of God is fully present on earth; a place of love and peace and justice and hope. We do not know WHEN that day will come, but we certainly know WHAT that day will look like. Jesus has made that clear. Love God. Love others. Birth goodness in the world. And when we do, one day, that day will come. Our mission is the same as it always has been.

Now is the time to increase our efforts for goodness in the world. No other institution or power will do it for us. It's up to us, here and now, on the local level, through faith communities like ours.

Because now it the time to increase our efforts for goodness, then, now is the time to increase your giving to Calvary too. If there is any year to say, I see how essential inclusive, loving communities of Goodness and Gospel Truth

are...*this* is that year. The day is approaching. The birth pangs are strong. New life is within our future. We need to do all that we can with all that we have as a midwife to God's kin-dom. It not only Mark's birth story of Jesus back then, it's the story of how we will birth new life and hope in our world today.

Singer-songer writer Carrie Newcomer sings: *"If not now, tell me when? If not now, tell me when?...We might never see this moment or place in time again, if not now, if not now, tell me when?"*<sup>22</sup>

If not now, tell me when. Midwives do not get to choose the moment of birth. They are just present every step of the way, so that they are present and ready when the new life emerges.

Give for Goodness today, and I promise, we will see new life tomorrow...

Amen.

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<sup>22</sup> Carrie Newcomer, "If Not Now" c. 2010.