

“The Most Possible Good”
Sermon from Psalm 22:1-11
Given Sunday, June 26, 2022
for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville
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*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far away, so far from saving me,
so far from the words of my groaning?
I cry all day, my God, but you never answer;
I cry all night long, and sleep deserts me.*

*But you, Holy One –
you sit enthroned on the praises of Israel.
Our ancestors put their trust in you;
they trusted and you rescued them;
they cried to you and were saved;
they trusted you and were never disappointed.*

*Yet here I am, more worm than human,
the scorn of humanity, an object of ridicule:
all who see me mock me;
they shake their heads and sneer,
“You trust in God? Ha! Let God save you now!
If God is your friend, let God rescue you!”*

*Yet you drew me out of the womb;
you nestled me and my mother's bosom;
you cradled me in your lap from my birth;
from my mother's womb you have been my God.*

—

I was standing outside of Eddie Bauer in a Topeka, Kansas mall when my water broke. This was fourteen and a half years ago,

but I remember it. I remember it was a snowy afternoon, and a sign meant to lure shoppers into the store promised up to 60% off the price of any winter coat.

I'd been sent to the mall by my midwife, who wanted me to walk. My due date was Christmas Day, which had come and long gone by that point, and she'd suggested a few more hours of walking before she'd ask me to drink castor oil to induce labor. We'd been seeing these same stores, my husband and I, these same sale signs, on every lap of our indoor journey. This sign posed some temptation, but each time around we'd kept moving, according to instructions, not necessarily fast, but steady. That time we paused - *how often is the thing you need on sale, right when you need it?* he was asking - and the break in our pattern was enough to move my baby into action.

I felt the water leave me. I saw the small puddle form at my feet. I hurried to the nearest bathroom. From the stall I called my midwife and told her what had happened. She advised me to get something to eat. It might be a long time before I'd feel like eating again, she said, and I would need the strength. We grabbed the best of the available mall food court options and headed back to the birthing center.

My midwife was also my best friend. That's a wonderful and complicated dual role for someone to play. There's a tremendous amount of intimacy in midwifery, more than usually even a best friend shares. I worried about that for a moment, somewhere deep in the throes of labor. Like, would it

make things weird, later, that she had been the one so present, so close in every way to this whole process?

At the moment, I assured myself that it would be fine, because she was a professional, and, really, because I had other things to worry about. She knew what she was doing and she was offering me her expertise and I was trusting in it, honoring it, even, and these roles were separate from our friendship.

In the years since, I've thought about what she did for me in those months, and those moments, and come to understand it as the deepest way of companionship imaginable. I am so lucky that the one who was there for the births of my children, is also someone who remains in my life, and can remember that sacred time with me.

Here's what my midwife, my friend, did: she gave me freedom. She respected my body, my choices, she honored what I said I was experiencing. She listened closely, so that she might understand deeply. She shared her wisdom. She taught me how to best care for myself, for the new life coming to be, for my baby when he was born. She held me. And not just because she was my friend. As my midwife, she held me through uncertainty and discomfort. She held me through fear and hope, through intense pain and eventual elation. She reminded me to breathe. She re-taught me how to breathe. She breathed with me.

I tell you about my midwife because we're devoting this summer to thinking about God's creation of humanity and about humanity's creation of God, too, to the many and varied ways we have historically imagined this highest good. And one image that we find hints at in scripture - one image that might still be useful, meaningful, today - is that of God as midwife.

Did you hear the Psalmist? We often read this passage on Good Friday - Jesus calls out the first line of it from the cross - but again, it's really the two voices, it's really the dialogue, that creates the meaning here. Yes, there is tremendous agony. There is deep and profound pain: "I cry all day; I cry all night long; I am more worm than human." And there is also this: at a break in the litany of betrayal, of abandonment, at a moment when the other voice is speaking, we hear the Psalmist remember, "You, God, drew me out of the womb; you nestled me in my mother's bosom; you cradled me in your lap from my birth; from my mother's womb you have been my God."

A midwife is not a father. A midwife is not a mother. Neither of the images for God we so commonly call on. A midwife might also be a parent, a guardian, a caretaker, but need not necessarily be. A midwife is one who nurtures life in someone else. One who offers themselves as a resource, day or night, one whose body and heart do the work of laboring alongside another.

I know that I have been lucky to have had relatively uncomplicated pregnancies and births. It was meaningful for

me to read another mother's reflection, a woman with three children, all born with midwives, who wrote, "I've been extremely fortunate to have highly skilled midwives attend my births. My life and the lives of my children depended on their watchfulness, decision-making, and care. They were not in control of my birthing processes but were able to use their resourcefulness, intelligence, and compassion to empower me to do what only I could do."

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She goes on, "Their presence gave me confidence and courage, their quiet voices comforted me deeply. My firstborn son was very literally rescued from death by my midwife's actions. Another midwife was present through one of the longest and most painful nights of my life as I labored with my daughter; when she was born my midwife laid her on my chest, sharing deeply in my joy and my relief. In my third birth a few months ago, it wasn't until I saw pictures that I realized how closely involved my midwife was throughout the process, how much I needed her quiet hands in my most vulnerable moments."

That is the story of the Psalm all over again, is it not? This work of nurturing life, of calling it forth, is largely unchanged over the millenia. It is, and has always been, about care, about attention, about sharing power, about honoring one another.

This author, who only identifies as Becca, continues this reflection by wondering about how we have historically named

God, wondering about the experiences and values those names have been born out of. She wonders, if our foremothers had named the Holy One - maybe we'd say at least in more public or recorded ways - if maybe 'midwife' would have emerged as a favored designation; God as one who continually welcomes new life in even the most excruciating circumstances.

She shares, "I have never found God absent in my darkest nights, even when the pain has threatened to swallow me, even when I've wished that I would die because the future felt too chaotic. When my heart was utterly broken, when my body was tangled unconscious, when I was separated from my firstborn after birth, even when I've been in the middle of a painful conflict with a trusted friend. God has always stayed close, putting pressure on my lower back, whispering truth to my inconsolable heart, hands covered in my blood, tears falling with my own. She hasn't been in control of or responsible for my pain but always present, always welcoming the most possible good, the healing, the new."

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It is complicated, today, to talk about birth. We have politicized the most intimate of decisions. We have politicized bodies - certain bodies, to be clear, not all bodies - and we have weaponized both joy and pain, hope and sorrow, in our

attempts to control what is not rightfully ours. Some have said that their way is God's way, some have called a decision of the Supreme Court a win for Jesus.

I hesitated preaching this image today for fear it would be heard as an endorsement of a particular agenda. But listen again to Becca's words, as she describes God as midwife: *always present, always welcoming the most possible good.*

That's not a particular outcome but a particular orientation. It's not a predetermined end but a determined presence, a faithful companionship, a will toward flourishing. Remember our modern-day prophet, who told us that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. That's harder and harder to trust, some days. Feels like the invitation is just to grab onto the end of that arc, all of us, try to weight it down, to keep the bend from turning some other way.

Every image of God we've created bears within it an invitation. The invitation of the image of God as midwife is this, friends: what is the most possible good? How might we labor alongside God to welcome it, to bring it to birth? How might we tend to it, nurture it, protect it? What is that good that only you can do, the beauty that only you are, and how is God empowering you to do it, to be it?

Amen.