

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
February 22, 2026 – The First Sunday in Lent
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11
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We are all familiar with the story of Adam and Eve, the Garden of Eden, and the Fall that we heard this morning. Many Christians have believed and do believe that this is an account of events that in fact happened. Other Christians have understood this as a myth, that like many other passages from the Bible, this account conveys truth without being literally true. This is the predominant understanding of the Fall in Anglican theology and biblical interpretation.

If the Genesis story is not literally true, what truth does it convey? Something is terribly wrong with the world; it is not as it was meant to be. Human choices and human behavior are to blame for much of what is wrong. When we look at our world, though there is goodness, we see much that is terribly wrong. "The Fall" is a way of helping us make sense of that wrongness: forgetting moral lessons that we know deep down, misusing the natural world, separation from one another and from God – these are the roots of problems like cruelty, indifference to the pain of others, greed, carelessness, cowardice, giving up when a choice is hard.

Our reading from Matthew's Gospel is an account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, 40 days of fasting and being tempted by the devil. Again, must we believe in the literal truth of this account, in the devil? Not necessarily. Perhaps it wasn't the devil orchestrating this scene in the wilderness. Perhaps what Matthew is describing is an inner battle. Being human, Jesus experienced the challenge of having God-given free will. Would he obey his own needs and desires, or would he obey God? The choice was his. The truth conveyed in Matthew's account is that Jesus rejected the temptation to use the power available to him in a manner contrary to the will of God. Jesus held fast to his faith in God, grounded in the messages in the Hebrew Bible. He trusted God's word and God's will – from the very beginning of his ministry.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, he speaks of the Fall, when the "first Adam" disobeyed God. He then talks about Christ – the "second Adam" – who obeyed God and restored our right connection to God that was lost in the Fall. In the words of the hymn, "Praise to the holiest in the height," "O loving wisdom of our God! When all was sin and shame, a second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came."

On the Sundays in Lent I plan to speak about the sacraments and sacramental rites in the Episcopal Church. Last Sunday our service was an extensive description of the Holy Eucharist and its meaning. Today I will speak about Baptism. Like Holy Communion, baptism is called a "dominical sacrament," from "*domini*," Latin for "of the Lord." The night before he died Jesus directed his followers to repeat his words and his actions of the Last Supper. The risen Lord, before his ascension, gave what is called "The Great Commission:" "Go ... and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). In these ways, the Eucharist and Baptism are "from the Lord."

"Baptism" means dipping or immersing something or someone in water. The rite of Baptism involves someone – usually clergy – immersing or pouring water upon a child or adult, saying the person's name and then "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." What do we understand this ritual to mean? There are at least three views of baptism in the New Testament: baptism as a cleansing from sin; baptism as a death of the old self and the rebirth of the new self; and baptism as inclusion or incorporation into a new community.

Baptism started with that singular character, John the Baptist. John was a first-century Jew, preaching to or denouncing his fellow Jews. But he didn't just talk or shout. Like the prophets, he demonstrated his beliefs by an active expression: he told his listeners they should be immersed in cleansing water in order to show openly that they were repenting, or renouncing, the unclean aspects of their lives. This was an established Jewish practice: bathing in water to overcome various incidents of ritual impurity or uncleanness (Leviticus, chapter 15). But John goes beyond ritual impurity. Like the prophets, he is concerned with moral uncleanness. Isaiah, for instance, says to the Israelites: "Wash yourselves ... cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (1:16-17). This is not just ritual impurity; what comes between the people and God is their immoral state, and the "washing" is a symbolic act of moral cleansing. So, John preaches a baptism for repentance and the forgiveness of sin. From Leviticus and the prophets, by way of John, we get baptism as cleansing from sin.

But among the followers of Jesus there was a sense that their practice needed to move beyond the baptism of John. John, after all, was not baptizing "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." In Acts 1:5 and elsewhere, there is a clear distinction between John's "baptism by water" and the "baptism of the Holy Spirit" practiced by Jesus' followers. It is in this understanding that St. Paul sees baptism as a way for the one being baptized to die to the old life of sin and be born into the new life of freedom from sin (Romans 6:1-11). This way of looking at baptism sees it as joining in Jesus' life and death so as to join in his resurrection. The baptized person, coming out of the water, is depicted as rising to new life as Jesus rose.

The third view of baptism is that of inclusion in the new community of the followers of Jesus. This is the situation in chapter 2 of the Book of Acts, when the community of Christians see the Holy Spirit descending and those who are witnesses of the events of Pentecost are baptized and join the new fellowship. In chapter 16:25-34, there is the account of the jailer who has charge of Paul and his companions, who are freed from prison by an earthquake. As a result of witnessing this miracle, the jailer and all his household are baptized and joined with the fellowship of Christians. It is from accounts like this, where entire families and household servants are all made new members of the Christian community, that the practice of baptizing even very young infants developed.

In the Anglican and Episcopal tradition, we look at the central truth of baptism in the following way. Though a person only participates in the ritual of baptism once, being baptized is not a once-for-all act in the sense that it is the beginning of a life of growing into the ministry and life of Jesus and into God's kingdom of eternal, that is, divine, life. When we are asked to renounce evil, we are taking the early steps into the life of discipleship; when we "die to sin" and "rise to the new life," we cross the threshold of a different way of living. And when we join with others in a community that is together seeking to live as Christ's body in the world, we are embarking on a life of growth and commitment to protecting the dignity of every human being.

The official position of the Episcopal Church is that a person must be baptized before receiving the Eucharist. However, there are many Episcopalians – lay and ordained – who support what is called "open Communion," that baptism is not a prerequisite for receiving the Eucharist. In the words of the White Earth Nation's Holy Eucharist, "This table belongs not to us, but to Christ. All are welcome."

May God help us to grow in understanding and in faith, in this season of Lent and always, in the name of Christ. Amen.