

## FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT, BAPTISM OF LEAH SICILIANO | FEBRUARY 26, 2023

GENESIS 2:15-17; 3:1-7 | PSALM 32 | ROMANS 5:12-19 | MATTHEW 4:1-11

This is for Leah, but if the rest of you want to stay and hang out, that's fine with me. (If you want to use this time to make a Dunkin run, I would not say no to a hazelnut coffee.)

Leah, you are being baptized today. This is an exciting day. One that your parents and I and a lot of other people have been looking forward to. But it is also an overwhelming day. Lots of prayers, lots of stuff, lots of stuff going on. In fact, you might be wondering *What's this whole baptism thing about?* Well, to make it very simple, your baptism is about leaving something behind and gaining something new.

So what are you leaving behind? Let's think about this in terms of today's Hebrew Bible reading. This is a story about how the world went from being just the way God intended, a world of peace and wholeness, to a world that people created, a world that's broken and unable to put itself back together quite right. It all starts when this crafty snake convinces Eve to eat from the tree in the middle of the garden.

But what's important in this story isn't the fruit. It's the conversation Eve and this serpent have. After all, the serpent doesn't get her to eat the fruit by telling her that it tastes really good or that she's really missing out on this. The serpent suggests that maybe God's promises aren't really true. That when God told Adam and Eve that they had everything they needed to have a peaceful and whole life, maybe that's not quite right. Maybe they need more than God has given them. And maybe they really can't trust God after all.

That's the fatal flaw in this story and, as you'll discover, in our lives. The fear that we can't trust God. And instead, we need to put our ultimate trust in our own achievements or success or security. The serpent and the snake and everything in this story is, of course, symbolic. But the results of our lack of trust, what we call "sin," are all too real. The world that we live in, a world torn apart by war and famine and environmental degradation is a long way off from the world God created and called "good."

That's why when we gathered for Ash Wednesday services this week, we had a long confession of sin that described what results from that lack of trust. Pride, envy, hypocrisy, and apathy. Self-indulgent appetites and exploitation of other people. Neglect of human need and suffering, and indifference to injustice and cruelty. All of these keep us from fully enjoying the life God intended for us and our neighbors.

So when we gather around the font in a few minutes, I'll ask the assembly, "Do you renounce the forces that defy God, the powers of this world that rebel against God, the ways of sin that draw you from God?" And they will say, "Yes." We're affirming that we are leaving these behind.

Do these powers still have control over us? Yea, they do. But we can recognize them and name them for what they are. We renounce them. So that when you are told that the creation is here to be exploited or that human need isn't your responsibility or that you can be indifferent as long as you're comfortable, you can recognize these voices for what they are. Nothing more than, well, snake-oil.

That's what you're leaving behind in your baptism. You are leaving behind anything that would keep you from loving God and your neighbor.

But you are gaining something in your baptism, too. At the very beginning of today's reading from Genesis, we are told that "the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." Humans aren't here to just putter around. They are here to *do* something. To till and keep creation. Tilling and keeping creation isn't just about caring for the environment, though it's part of it, but it's about the ways we care for all of God's creation. The ways that we love and serve our neighbors.

The word that we use for this in our tradition is "vocation." When you are baptized, you are given a vocation. A calling to love God and serve your neighbors. When the assembly welcomes you at the end of the baptismal rite, they'll say, "We welcome you into the body of Christ and into the mission we share... bearing God's creative and redeeming word to all the world."

That's your vocation, your purpose in life. Bearing God's creative and redeeming word to all the world. How you do that is up to you. There are an infinite number of ways that you can "till and keep" God's creation. And they will change and evolve as you go through your life. Sometimes they will be obvious. Sometimes they'll be more subtle. But because of your baptism, you have a vocation and a calling no matter what happens to you in your life. Your life may feel directionless and stagnant and just sort of *blab* at times,

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777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481

(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG

but your life is never without purpose. Because you are always a part of this mission that God has given to us as the body of Christ. And once you are given that vocation today, that purpose will never leave you.

Now here's the fun part of all this. Your baptism is only going to happen once. But you will live your baptism every day of your life. From time to time in worship, I'll invite you to remember your baptism. That doesn't mean remember how good the cake was and how cold the water was. You won't remember either. It means remember what you've left behind here and remember what you've gained.

Remember that in the waters of your baptism, you've left behind anything that would keep you away from loving God and loving your neighbor. You've left behind anything that would prevent you from trusting God's promises. And remember that you've gained a vocation and a purpose in life that no person, no condition, and no experience can ever take away from you. In other words, remember your baptism so that you can live your baptism. So that you can live as if what God says about you, your neighbors, and all of God's creation is actually true.

So, Leah, remember that today and always, you are a baptized child of God. Welcome to the body of Christ and the mission we share.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor