Selling Our Souls, February 26, 2023, St. Timothy, Burnaby
Genesis 2.15-17; 3.1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5.12-19; Matthew 4.1-11

Prayer

Growing up, I thought I knew what it meant to "make a deal with the devil". Often when somebody in my Catholic school would talk about a movie star or a famous musician or group, they would suggest that they had "made a deal with the devil" in exchange for their fame. Me being more than a little naïve, thought that this was something quite literal—that a man in red pajamas with horns would show up with a contract and the members of Guns 'n Roses or KISS signed up—and just like that, they were famous. The examples I had to draw from seemed to support this idea—even though I wasn't supposed to watch The Simpsons on TV, I can think of two episodes fairly early on where characters make dubious "deals" – in one Homer trades his soul for a jelly donut, and in another episode Bart sells his soul away and imagines what life is like at a picnic where everyone else has a partner (their soul), but him. But even the biblical examples I had seemed to support this literal "making a deal with the devil" – and we heard two of them today: Adam and Eve in the garden, tempted by the serpent to go against God's wishes, and Jesus in the desert literally being tempted by Satan.

I thought it would be pretty easy to avoid making a deal with the devil – or selling my soul to the devil. As long as I never had a conversation with a serpent, or a man with horns, and never put my signature on any piece of paper they offered me, I should be covered.

But now that I'm a lot older and a little bit wiser, I see that it is possible to "make a deal with the devil" in all kinds of circumstances—we have the opportunity to sell a little piece of our soul almost every day.

We see the way that the devil operates in the gospel text. It is only *after* Jesus has fasted forty days and forty nights that the Devil makes his appearance. Jesus was *famished* (as would be expected). So, the tempter starts small – just turn this rock into a loaf of bread. A simple task, and well within the power of Jesus (given what we saw later with the feeding of the five thousand). So, what's the issue? Jesus' quote from the scripture doesn't help much. The temptation for Jesus (and the temptation for many of us as well) is to take the easy way out—the way that takes advantage of our position and power. Jumping to the front of the line. Putting ourselves *first*. It's a great temptation—especially when we're famished. In the first instance, it's food for a starving Jesus. But in the second temptation, it's recognition from the worshippers of God in the temple. If Jesus were to throw himself from the temple and be rescued by angels, how could all those gathered to pray at the temple deny him who he was? It was a fast track to universal recognition even before his ministry began.

The third temptation was for Jesus to have as his possession all of the world and its splendour—not by earning it, not by working for it, not through hundreds of years of gradual growth and more than a few downturns. But just handed over on a silver platter all at once. Tempting. But what of the cost?

We are all tempted as Jesus was tempted—but also *not* as Jesus was tempted. Our temptations don't show up in the form of a literal devil. And our temptations are usually not as grandiose as Jesus' temptations were. They're more…mundane. And we give in to them sometimes without even realizing what it is we're doing.

Sometimes it just looks like "the ends justifies the means". We convince ourselves that as long as the outcome is okay, the steps we had to take to get there or the people we had to hurt are "worth it" in the

end. And, sometimes a “deal with the devil” looks like giving ourselves a “pass” because our “hearts were in the right place”.

Very often, making a “deal with the devil looks like taking the easy way out. Taking the shortcut. Putting ourselves first. Jumping to the finish line without running the race.

Perhaps one way we might choose to exercise self-control and spiritual disciple in the season of Lent is to ponder the ways in which we succumb to temptation regularly. Often Lent is associated with giving something up—something we like. People give up chocolates or wine or television. But the idea of giving something up for Lent is not that those things we give up are *bad* (in and of themselves), but that even those good things can prevent us from fully connecting with God. By temporarily removing them from our lives, we discipline ourselves instead to use that time to think about God, or to commune with God in prayer. Perhaps this Lent, we can spend some time thinking about the ways that the Tempter comes to us in our most vulnerable state, promising to give us the things we want, and the things that seem so impossibly distant sometimes—things that are good, in and of themselves: knowledge of good and evil; food; the universal acceptance of Jesus by all the world (as some convenient examples).

Through disciplined prayer and study of the scripture, we might also come to *another* challenging realization—one that I’m still working on. The notion that just because something is *hard*, doesn’t make it *good*. That although succumbing to temptation can *often* look like taking the easy way out, the easy route is not always the *bad* one. Sometimes we (or, I should say “I” here) can be tempted to take the harder route *just because it’s the harder route*, and not because the easier route is “bad” or “sinful”. And sometimes that hard route is *also* sinful, as it can prevent seeking help from others and collaboration (which are usually *good* things).

May we all be “on the lookout” this Lent for the ways we are tempted. May we stand up to and resist those things which tempt us away from God’s path for our lives. Amen.