Sunday, February 10, 1980
CAMPAIGN PROMISES
Genesis 3:1-7; Luke 4:1-13

"Promises, promises!" We've all made that comment. Sometimes we don't want to hear any more promises because we're sure they won't be kept. Yet deep down within us, there's another part of us which wants to believe the promises that are made to us. "Buying this list of names and selling it to others can bring you lots of money." Many people want to believe that promise.

Political campaigns are filled with promises. "I promise to keep this country out of war." "I promise to end inflation." "I promise to balance the federal budget." "I promise not to raise taxes." In the midst of a political campaign, an experienced politician was asked his opinion on a matter of considerable controversy. Knowing that votes were important, he hesitated for a moment. Then he said, "Some of my friends take that position, others of my friends take the opposite position. I always support my friends."

But lest we be too hard on the politicians about the promises they make and do not keep, or the promises they make, not because they believe in them, but merely to get elected — let us remember that those of us who are not politicians also make promises which we do not keep and promises which deep within us we have no intention of ever carrying out. One only as to look at the unpaid financial pledges which people make to the church each year.

Parents solemnly and publicly promise at the baptism of their child, "We promise with God's help, by our life and teaching, to lead this child toward an understanding of the Christian Gospel and into the service of Jesus Christ. We also promise to guide and instruct our child that she may be led to the confession of Christ as Lord and Savior of the world and to the communion of the Lord's Table and to confirmation into responsible membership in Christ's Church."

Such promises are frequently made and then soon forgotten. Or take the promises we make to our spouse in marriage. "I promise to love and sustain you in the bonds of marriage from this day forward, in joy and in sorrow, in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health, till death shall part us, according to God's holy ordinance."

I remember one couple who wanted to be married in this church and who also planned to write their own marriage vows. They brought what they had written, and they read something like this — "I promise to be faithful to you and to love you and care for your as long as I feel like it." They didn't want to promise very much for very long or maybe they just wanted to be more honest about their promises. I suggested that their vows be stated with more conviction.

We all make promises and have promises made to us. Society would soon fall apart without promises made and kept. So, this is not a sermon against the making and receiving of promises, but rather that we take our promises and the promises of others more seriously — that we pay attention to the promises we make and their implications and that we hold each other accountable. And even more than that, our Christian faith further reminds us that we all need to learn to distinguish between false promises and true promises.

So, this morning let's talk first about some of the false promises made to us by the Devil, promises that are so tempting that we want to believe them and often do believe them.

Incidentally, I'm not going to get into a long discussion about who or what the Devil is, or whether or not the Devil is personal. I agree with the way my colleague Bill Coffin described the Devil.

"The Devil is a person, because evil is experienced as an intensely personal power in the same way that God is a person because God is experienced as an intensely personal power. Also, the Devil has to have a separate existence not because evil exists outside of us, but because evil is experienced as something within and greater than us."

In other words, to speak of the Devil is to speak of the reality of evil in the world and in our personal lives. Furthermore, the Devil is very tricky, always attempting to corrupt the best that is in us, always attempting to undermine our freedom. The Devil does not always suggest that we do something bad; oftentimes he suggests that we do what appears at the moment to be good.

1. That's the first campaign promise of the Devil — Do what seems good at the time and don't worry about the 3. problems it may cause for you or for others in the future. This is exactly the kind of campaign promise the Devil tried to use in the temptations of Jesus, as recorded in the Gospel of Luke. First the Devil suggested that Jesus turn the stones into bread. What could be wrong with that?

Not only was this an alluring temptation because Jesus was hungry after having fasted for forty days, but even more tempting because with this kind of miracle, Jesus could ·feed the hungry and the poor.

Had you or I been in the place of Jesus we might have reasoned as follows: why shouldn't I give my people bread? God himself knows how poor and hungry they are. And after all, didn't Moses and Israelites receive manna from God when they were in the desert and about to starve to death?

Here was the temptation to compromise one's calling by substituting what seemed good at the moment in place of what's best overall.

2. A second campaign promise of the Devil is that although something might appear to be evil, it won't hurt us. This is what the Devil promised to Eve in the Garden of Eden.

The serpent asked Eve, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any of the trees in the Garden?'" This was not what God said, but evil when it tempts us often begins its temptation by misstating the proposition. Eve got by the first hurdle. She correctly reported the command of God, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden; neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'"

Note especially that Eve completely undersood God's commandment. Most people yield to temptation, not because they did not know right from wrong, but rather because they are convinced that to do what's wrong won't really hurt anyone or anything. That's exactly what the Devil wants us to think.

The people who were involved in Watergate knew they were doing wrong. They did not do what they did out of ignorance. They could have quoted chapter and verse as easily as Eve, or maybe even more easily because a lot of those involved were lawyers. In the present

investigation of possible bribe-taking by some members of Congress, you can bet that if wrongdoing is proved, those who were involved knew they were doing wrong.

The problem with most of us and temptation and the evil which results is that we believe the campaign promise that doing a little evil will not hurt us or anyone. It's just an innocent little caper. Or we justify our wrongdoing by saying we're doing it for a higher purpose. I remember back in the Watergate days many people said, "After all, no one really got hurt, no one was killed," as if killing is the only evil that really exists in this world.

The serpent said to Eve, after she correctly quoted God's commandment, "Don't worry, you will not die." Someone is forever promising us that we will escape the consequences of our deeds. Listen to everyday conversation and the promises that are made. "Just try this little drug, a little bit won't hurt you." "Don't worry, you won't get pregnant." "If anything happens, I'll marry you." "If you rea11y 1ove me, a little sex won't hurt you." "Just take one more drink."

Even those involved in Watergate believe they would escape the consequences of their wrongdoing. "You will not die." The power of the presidency will save you from the consequences of your illegal deeds.

3. Not only will you escape the consequences of your deeds, not only will evil not hurt you, but the Devil goes one step further and promises — it will be good for you. You will be the better for it. Sin is sold on the promise of the good it will do for us. That's the third campaign promise of the Devil. Thus, the serpent said to Eve, "God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, you will be better off." You don't know what you're missing.

From the very beginning the temptation of evil has been that obeying the commandments, following the law is keeping you from the fun of life. Someone is always trying to liberate us as the Serpent liberated Eve and Adam.

The campaign promise is made — you will be better off if you give in. Don't be bound by any rules. Be free. Do your own thing. Whatever else can be said for this promise, it cannot be said to be something new. It's the very same line which the Serpent used in the opening pages of the Bible. Slavery is always sold in the name of freedom and liberation. It sells better under that brand name than under the generic name of slavery.

Every war is said to the people in the name of goodness. "We are going to make the world safe for democracy. We are fighting this war to end all wars. We are going to make Vietnam free. We are going to murder the murderers and thereby do away with murder. We had to destroy the village in order to save it. We are going to take away your rights in order to protect them. The serpent still makes its promises. You will be like God."

More armaments, increased defense spending will save us. A nation that can blow half the world apart is not able to bring 50 hostages safely home with all those armaments and bombs. Our ability to blow up half the world turns out to be of no use at all when it comes to protecting hostages in the hands of people who aren't afraid of our bombs.

But the Devil's campaign promise still seduces us — "You will be the better for it. Using evil won't hurt you, it will help you. Your life will be improved. Many of the ads which attempt to sell us rely on the reasoning of this third promise. Your life will be improved if you smoke brand X of cigarettes. Be free, don't worry about the consequences.

In a remarkable essay in TIME Magazine, the February 4, issue, entitled “Back to Reticence,” the writer hit on the same theme. He said, “Americans have been steadily relinquishing their inhibitions about the social consequences of their actions...the daily grind of the offensive is both tiring and humiliating... It is impossible to watch an evening of network television without being treated to a stream of 30 second treatises on hemorrhoids, tampons, feminine deodorant sprays and constipation. ‘I want to talk to you about diarrhea,’ says an earnest pitchman.”

The essay went on to say — “Much of today’s offensiveness began in the guise of a virtue — honesty. The doctrine of ‘letting it all hang out.’ The result is a legacy of insufferable and interminable candor... we are left with a residue of bad habits, ugly noises, and moral slackness. The depressing quality of much American public behavior is its edgy meanness. Bad enough that it is calculatedly cheap.”

The devil is always tempting us with campaign promises. Do what seems good at the time, don’t worry about the consequences; a little evil or sin will not hurt you; you will be better off because of the evil you use, and it will benefit others as well.

The only sure way to resist the promises of evil is to do what Jesus Christ did, rely instead on the promises of God. “Wait on the Lord, be of good courage, and he will strengthen you. Wait, I say, on the Lord.”

“Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink...Look at the birds of the air, they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?”

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” “Lord thou has been our dwelling place in all generations.” “To the one who is faithful, I will give the crown of life.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. Amen.