

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 16, 2022 – LENTEN MIDWEEK 3 – GENESIS 39:1-21

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

⁶ Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. ⁷ And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." ⁸ But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. ⁹ He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" ¹⁰ And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her. ¹¹ But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house, ¹² she caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house. (Gen. 39:6-12 ESV). Thus far our text.

We love to bemoan the state of the society in which we live. There's nothing approaching shame anymore; the limits are completely gone on that which is offensive and uncouth and inappropriate anymore. We've invented new ways to practice depravity; it seems as if our hearts and minds are etched with the sin that clings to us like glue. It's not enough anymore to have the temptation to sin in our hearts and minds; rather, we feel the compelling urge to act upon these desires, and try to excuse them away by relative morality, discarding the righteous standards of God for the comparison that we make between ourselves and others. We like to pretend that this is a state which is modern and contemporary in its stain, and that things were somehow more pure and chaste in the past. But, this passage from Genesis Chapter 39 tells us that we have no corner on the market when it comes to great shame and vice – even in Biblical times, people got themselves into a pickle of sexual immorality

and other sins against one's own body, which Luther reminds us from St. Paul, are sins against our own bodies, which are temples of the Holy Spirit.

Joseph was a young man of seventeen or eighteen years, sold into slavery in Egypt, with few chances for upward mobility. Thanks be to God, he wasn't left in the prison for long – Potiphar purchased him as a slave, and Joseph proved his worthiness to his new master, and Potiphar moved him up to being in command of his entire household within short order. Even though Joseph was in a difficult situation, God blessed him with many opportunities to improve his situation. When Potiphar's wife selected him for her affections, and wanted him to sleep with her, Joseph resisted completely and repeatedly. She tried over and over again to get Joseph to respond to her wiles, but he didn't give in. Even to the point of fleeing with his clothing in her hand, when she tried to lay hands on him, he resisted the temptation to outward and shameful sin. No doubt, this would have been a temptation for him – after all, it might have improved his earthly situation greatly – more food, more clothing, higher status within the household. Potiphar's wife would probably have seen to it that he was well-rewarded. But, Joseph was blessed to have the Law of God deep within his soul. His conscience took over where his training as a young Hebrew might have been lacking. Remember that it wasn't for the first time that the Israelites learned the Law of God when Moses presented it to them on the tablets of stone – God wrote it on their hearts when He created them in the Garden of Eden. Even though the image of God was lost in the fall, the Law of God wasn't lost, nor was it abrogated – rather, it was preserved, spread and kept in the heart.

Luther refers to this steadfastness of faith, this resisting of temptation, as the “miracle of miracles”. Even though the temptation was great, Joseph's faith was stronger. Even though it would have been easy to succumb to the temptation, and to blame his meager and unfortunate circumstances for his lapse, Joseph was having none of it. Joseph didn't lose hope, didn't lose faith, didn't give in to temptation.

Today, we have even more temptations to sin sexually and otherwise. We have more opportunity to succumb to this without anyone knowing what we're up to. We live in the age of the computer, where images dance on the screen at a moment's bidding – you don't have to leave your house to have your sinful inclinations satisfied. It doesn't even have to involve being with someone else physically – temptation to sinful thoughts transcends all digital and physical separation. Thanks be to God that He kept Joseph pure, and that He keeps us pure in our daily lives, every day.

But, just because we avoid gross, outward outbursts of sin, doesn't mean that we are pure and chaste in every aspect of our lives. We each have our own temptations to sinful thoughts, words and deeds. Even if we don't engage in sinful actions, we'd like to. As Jesus explains in the Sermon on the Mount, it's not enough to just keep the letter of God's Law; we also are called to obey the spirit of the Law. It's not enough to avoid fornication, adultery and other great sin and vice; we are also to keep ourselves from desiring these things, objectifying the sins of the flesh. But, thanks be to God, and here again, the "miracle of miracles" terminology comes in – in the same vein as Joseph withstood this temptation, so Jesus kept Himself pure from EVERY temptation. He was tempted in every way that we are, yet was without sin. We know from Matthew chapter 4 about the three "biggie" sins that the devil tempted Jesus with – that of hunger, putting God to the test, and valuing the things of this world more than the things of the world to come. But that was not the only temptation to sin that Jesus endured, and overcame, solely with the Word of God as His offensive weapon. He was tempted to forego His passion – He knew what was coming, when it was coming, and how horrible it was going to be. He prayed to the Father that, if it were possible, could the Passion that was coming be spared from Him. Yet, not as He willed, but as the Father willed, would things be done. He was tempted to not go through with it. But, He was able to resist that temptation, and go on and win the victory over the devil, the world, and our sinful nature.

You see, sin is so alluring because the devil is called the great tempter. He makes sin seem more attractive than chastity; disobedience seem much more logical than righteousness. All the way back in the Garden of Eden, the evil one made Eve question the motives of God, and whether or not He had the best interests of the first man and woman in mind when He set up the prohibition against eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It's so easy, especially when we are living our daily lives, to think that it would be so easy to just fudge one or two of God's commandments. After all, God is full of grace and mercy. We know that He will just forgive us anyway...why not live it up a little bit? This type of premeditated sin is dangerous, and it is doubly evil. Paul addresses this in Romans chapter 6, when he asks the rhetorical question, "Shall we go on sinning so that grace will increase?" His answer shocked some of his readers, I'm sure: "Certainly not!" Paul couldn't have chosen a more emphatic denial than this – our English translation waters it down a bit. We must flee from sin, and not let it get a foothold in our minds and hearts. Otherwise, like Cain, it will build and fester within us, leading to greater and greater shame and vice, until it destroys our hearts and souls. But, thanks to God, the "miracle of miracles" has occurred. Christ has come, lived a sinless life, and transferred the benefits of such a perfect life, death and resurrection to us. Not because we deserved it, but because He loves us so much that He doesn't want us to perish, but have eternal life.

We call this atonement the "great exchange" – our sins are put on Christ, and His righteousness is placed upon us. It's inordinately unfair – we don't deserve to have such a wonderful thing done to us. He didn't deserve all of the beatings, the punishments, the scourging, the crucifixion, and the death that was visited upon Him. But, this horrible, unfair wrath of God being placed upon Jesus the Son of God was the only way for us to be freed from the guilt of our sin. The only way that we have the power to resist sin is because of what Jesus did on our behalf. Otherwise, the devil would have won the battle, and we would have no hope. But, because Christ has triumphed over sin, death, and the devil, the Holy Spirit works within us to create and sustain saving faith in our hearts. We are tempted daily and hourly

to break the commandments of God, fall into great sin and vice, and ultimately be condemned to the fires of hell. But, like in the life of Joseph, thanks be to God that He gives us the power to withstand the temptations of our sinful flesh. He has won the victory. The “miracle of miracles”, evidenced in our lives and in the life of Joseph, is that we can conquer and defeat the evil one with the Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. That’s why we need to be familiar with it, read, mark, and inwardly digest it. Only when we are intimately familiar with the Word of God will we have it to draw on in the time of temptation, and have it guide us into all truth. Joseph withstood temptation, especially in the episode with Potiphar’s wife; Jesus withstood all temptation, and never sinned once; we are given the power to not give in to sin, both in our thoughts and our words and deeds, by the power of the Holy Spirit within us. That’s the great “miracle of miracles” that the Holy Spirit does in our midst. Thanks be to God that He does so even today. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.