

Genesis 39:6-23
5th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon Series: Bible Stories
Joseph and Potiphar's Wife - Persecution

Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church
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⁶ Potiphar left everything he had in Joseph's care; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate.

Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, ⁷ and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!"

⁸ But he refused. "With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. ⁹ No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" ¹⁰ And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.

¹¹ One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. ¹² She caught him by his cloak and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house.

¹³ When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house, ¹⁴ she called her household servants. "Look," she said to them, "this Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us! He came in here to sleep with me, but I screamed. ¹⁵ When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house."

¹⁶ She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home. ¹⁷ Then she told him this story: "That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me. ¹⁸ But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house."

¹⁹ When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, "This is how your slave treated me," he burned with anger. ²⁰ Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined.

But while Joseph was there in the prison, ²¹ the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. ²² So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. ²³ The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.

Grace and peace to you from our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The devil cannot stand faithful believers. So he goes after them with a vengeance, either to disgrace them and lure them from the faith, or through persecuting them with the hopes of backing them out of their faith. Now, it's true, of course, that the devil also works to keep those who are in the dark blind to the truth of God's Word. He continues working bit by bit on those members of Christian churches who have strayed from the truth, and who no longer value hearing God's Word or receiving His Sacrament. He continues doing his worst where those people are concerned to keep them from coming to Jesus and His Word and hearing the sweet message of the gospel. But don't be mistaken, he is going to be working particularly hard on

you, to pry you away from the security that you presently enjoy in the arms of your loving Savior.

Jesus has promised us that **nothing is able to snatch us out of His or His Father's hand** (John 10:28, 29). Satan knows this. He knows he can't grab us out of Jesus' hand so tries his best to lure us into leaving it on our own or to back us into leaving its safety in the interests of "self-preservation." We see both of those ploys at work today in our Old Testament lesson.

When it comes to luring Christians away from Christ, the devil favors some tools over others. Power, popularity, wealth, the mindless escape offered by drugs. These have long been some of his favorite and most effective tools. But none more so than sex. Sex is an incredible gift from God. It isn't something that we need to be ashamed of or feel dirty about. It is something, however, that we want to treat with a sense of propriety and enjoy only within the boundaries in which God has instructed it be used. In short, sex is a gift to be enjoyed in marriage, between a husband and wife.

The abuse of sex, on the other hand, is incredibly dangerous. It damages what is or may one day be the single closest relationship you enjoy with another human being. It takes what is meant to be a loving, self-giving act and turns it into a selfish, self-pleasing act. It takes a wonderful gift of God and perverts it. The abuse of sex is a favorite tool of the devil. It offers everything that our sinful flesh desires making it a powerful tool to lure devout Christians away from the Lord, both young and old alike.

It's encouraging then, to hear the story of young, seventeen-year-old man named Joseph who overcame sexual temptation out of a desire to remain faithful to God. Joseph was on pretty hard times. After running into trouble with his family back home, betrayed by his own flesh and blood, he found himself now far away and alone working in a foreign country. And that's when it happened. In the midst of this trying and emotional time, the devil sought to lure Joseph away from God. The bait, was an older woman, the wife of Joseph's boss, who came to him and said, "Come have sex with me."

The rest of the story doesn't go the way a modern-day American might expect. In movies and on television today, the almost guaranteed response to such an offer would have been consent. Young and old alike, the ideal that is driven again and again into our minds is that sex, regardless of whom it is with, is good. Why would you say "no" to something that is good? But Joseph understood according to God's Word, that sex in this situation would not good, in fact, under these circumstances having sex with this woman would be evil and wicked, it would be a sin against God.

"With me in charge," he explained to her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.

For a teenager, Joseph had a very mature head on his shoulders. He knew that sex before or outside of marriage was a sin in the eyes of God. But he didn't just know that to be the case, he acted on it. When the temptation to sin confronted him, he called out the sin for what it was. **How could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?**

In his popular hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is our God*, Martin Luther depicts for us the terrible power of the devil as he works against us. "The old evil foe now means deadly woe; deep guile and great might are his dread arms in fight; on earth is not his equal. With our own might naught can be done; soon were our loss effected." But with the "valiant one," Jesus,

fighting on our side, things are different. The devil is defeated. He's judged the deed is done. "One little word can fell him." What is the little word that can stop Satan in his tracks? Do you know? What was Luther thinking of when he wrote that famous hymn? Later in his life, when asked that very question he said the word is "liar." Through Jesus, we're able to see the devil's lies for what they are. Rather than be lured away by the false promises they offer we can simply respond "that's a lie," and continue our life as a redeemed child of God.

When the TV or Computer screen displays someone in a manner meant to be sexually provocative and the whole wide world seems to say "go ahead and look, it's fine really, this is perfectly acceptable," in Christ you and I are able to say, "Liar! No, it isn't. This is not right, this is a perversion of God's gifts. This is wicked. This is a sin." And it helps to say it out loud like Joseph did, **How could I do such a wicked thing? How could I sin against God?** I can't look at this. I can't do that. It simply is not okay.

Recognize the temptation. Identify the lie. And then flee from it. **Though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.** If the situation persists, remove yourself from the situation. If there's a certain program that leads you into temptation, stop watching the program. If a certain website keeps inundating you with ads that you do not want to see, stop going to that webpage. If someone is continuing to pressure you into doing something you know is wicked, something you know is a sin against God, then don't even permit yourself to be with that person.

Joseph demonstrated incredible restraint, Christian maturity, and respect for himself, for his master Potiphar, and even for Potiphar's wife. Joseph demonstrated admirable faithfulness to the Lord. And he suffered for it, didn't he? Angered by his rejection—her lust changed to rage—Potiphar's wife concocted a story that would result in Joseph being thrown into prison. There's an old adage that says, "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned." And while it may seem on the surface that that's all the more that we see being played out in this story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, that's not the case. "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned," aside from being rather sexist, is not true. The wrath of Satan when he is scorned is far more furious than that of any man or woman, and when Satan is rejected by the faithful in his attempts to lure them away from the faith, he doesn't give up, he merely turns up the heat.

In Joseph's case, the devil continued working through the agency of Mrs. Potiphar, now with the new end of persecution rather than seduction. "If Joseph's faith is so strong," Satan seems to have been reasoning, "then let's see what happens when his faithfulness lands him in prison." If he couldn't entice Joseph away, perhaps he could crush his will through persecution to the point that he would willingly forsake his God. What did happen with Joseph? Did he cave-in to the devil's pressure? Did he curse God and forsake him? No. Once again, this teenage boy demonstrated remarkable faith worthy of admiration and imitation by any of us. His integrity persisted even in prison. He did not give up on God for this seemingly unfair persecution. He did not sink into sullen depression or turn bitter and angry, rather he carried his faith and integrity with him, continuing to trust in the protection and the promises of his God.

And what happened? His faith was rewarded. Joseph was placed in charge of the prison by the warden and God blessed him with success in everything he put his hand to. Joseph's imprisonment eventually led to his being noticed by the Pharaoh, after which he was released and elevated to second in command over all of Egypt.

Joseph's story is incredible. His perseverance in the face of Satan's guiles and oppression is inspiring. It leads us to wish that we might be able to act the same in similar situations. If only we could have such commitment and faith. You can. How? By

strengthening ourselves in the words and promises of our God which He gives us in the Scriptures and in the Sacraments. By living in God's promises, like Joseph.

But how can you live in the promises of God unless you know them? How can you mature in integrity and steadfastness toward God, in humility and perseverance and honesty if you don't let the Holy Spirit cultivate your faith through daily devotion to His Means of Grace?

The God who kept the promise that showed the ultimate love—sacrificing Himself for us, dying for us that we might live—will certainly keep His other promises to us as well, even in times of persecution! Don't think that Joseph knew how his story was going to end. He had no idea that God was grooming him through his time in prison to become a ruler over the world's superpower. How could he have?

As the days and months and years went past if must have felt like his life was going absolutely nowhere, and all of that adversity had come why? Because of something rotten he had done? No. Because he had stood steadfast in the faith. Yet through it all Joseph knew what counted most. He knew that his eternal destiny, held fast by the coming Messiah, was something that no one could wrest away from him and so he continued to let his light shine in a heathen jail, in a heathen country, as he endured harsh consequences for an action he had never committed. He was able to do it, because he had his eyes and his heart fixed on the coming Messiah and on the gift of everlasting life that was promised to him by His God.

Dear Christian family, as we daily face temptation and persecution, **let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him, endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Let us consider Him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart** (Heb 12:1a-3).

Amen.

**And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.**

Amen.