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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/3/2010, Midweek Lent 2
Joseph in Egypt (Genesis 39:1-20)
Also, Luke 23:39-43. Nothing Amiss

PRAYER OF THE DAY

☐ Eternal God, it is your glory always to have mercy. Bring back all who have erred and strayed from your ways; lead them again to embrace in faith the truth of your Word and to hold it fast; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen

FIRST LESSON.....Genesis 39:1-20, RSV

¹Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. ²The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian, ³and his master saw that the LORD was with him, and that the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hands. ⁴So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. ⁵From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the LORD was upon all that he had, in house and field. ⁶So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge; and having him he had no concern for anything but the food which he ate. Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking. ⁷And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph, and said, "Lie with me." ⁸But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Lo, having me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand; ⁹he is not greater in this house than I am; nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife; how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" ¹⁰And although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie with her or to be with her. ¹¹But 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, ¹²she 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. ¹³And when she saw that he had left his garment in her hand, and had fled out of the house, ¹⁴she called to the men of her household and said to them, "See, he has brought among us a Hebrew to insult us; he came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice; ¹⁵and when he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment with me, and fled and got out of the house." ¹⁶Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home, ¹⁷and she told him the same story, saying, "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to insult me; ¹⁸but as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment with me, and fled out of the house." ¹⁹When

his master heard the words which his wife spoke to him, “This is the way your servant treated me,” his anger was kindled.²⁰ And Joseph’s master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined, and he was there in prison.

HOLY GOSPELLuke 23:39-43, KJV

³⁹And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. ⁴⁰But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. ⁴²And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. ⁴³And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.

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

My opening text is the testimony of the dying thief, the one who defended Jesus, saying,

...but this man hath done nothing amiss. (Luke 23:41, KJV)

What a wonderful summation of a life: nothing amiss! It is praise that exceeds what you and I are likely to accomplish. But would it not be splendid if it could be said of us one day that we had journeyed through all the twists and turns of life and come out on yonder side having done “nothing amiss”? A wonderful summation indeed!

The malefactor who praised Jesus probably had in mind the short section of our Lord’s life that he had beheld with his own eyes. Well, that which he beheld was an intense, agonizing stretch of life, which Jesus endured with such grace and dignity that it compelled the condemned thief to pay heed and to render his judgment. Nothing amiss!

But wonder of wonders, the whole of Christ’s life was well deserving of that praise too. Pilate, they say, ordered that a sign should be hammered in place on the cross of Christ saying, “The King of the Jews.” Pilate could just have well had it published that this man was innocent. “Nothing amiss!” What a title overtop a person’s life!

Jesus was the opposite of the young man in the beloved parable “The Prodigal Son.” That young man journeyed into a far country and “there wasted his substance with riotous living.” (Luke 15:13, KJV) His furious elder brother accuses him of having “devoured your living with harlots.” (Luke 15:30, KJV), and the young man does not deny it. He makes no defense of his earlier life. He knows that he has “sinned against heaven, and in thy sight.” (Luke 15:21, KJV) Such things can young men do, and have done. Such things can young women do, and have done.

But Jesus ventured into the farthest of countries, and never went astray. He left heaven above and pilgrimed in our world, having no place to lay his head, poorer than the foxes in their dens and the birds in their nests. He was tempted, vexed, threatened, and ultimately killed, yet he never condescended to sin. He continued in virtue and love all the live long day, each day of his life.

So it was with young Joseph. He journeyed into a far country, but did not suppose that being in that strange land somehow authorized him to fall into sin. He was deprived of his pious father and mother. He was dispossessed of the sacred liturgy worshipping the God of Abraham, Isaac, and his father Jacob. He was stripped of the ways of his kin and culture. Those rules and customs of life that help keep you and me on track: he was bereft of them and left with only his own spiritual resources. But you can take everything else away from a man, but you cannot take God from the man if the man would have the Lord even in a foreign land. And such a man was Joseph.

Many a school child knows the story of Joseph and his coat of many colors. Joseph's father favored the boy and gave him that many-colored coat. (Genesis 37:3) This parental favour caused Joseph's older brothers to hate him, and they did him in. At one point they decided to kill the boy. In the end, they sold him into slavery. They sold him to a passing caravan heading down to Egypt. "That's the end of the boy, the end of that dreamer," they said to themselves.

Our reading this evening picks up at that point. Pity the poor slave. Imagine young Joseph on the trading block. The eyes of strangers survey him. They consider buying him, as they would consider buying a piece of land. They behold him, but do not behold *him*, a person. They do not perceive the soul. They imagine that he has none. He is chattel property.

What kind of a master will he have? Some masters are cruel. Perhaps he will be bought by a kind-hearted man. And that is how it works out. Joseph is bought by an Egyptian named Potiphar. He is the kind of man who has enough grace about him that he can recognize virtue in others. Potiphar perceives that "the LORD was with him," with Joseph, and so Potiphar entrusted management of his household to this Hebrew slave.

Now we come to trouble: Potiphar's wife. She desired Joseph. She desired to sleep with him:

And it came to pass after these things, that his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph; and she said, Lie with me. (Genesis 39:7, KJV)

You and I know enough about the human heart, that we know ourselves vulnerable to sin, especially when we are fatigued or discouraged. We can permit ourselves to be persuaded by arguments that on a better day would not convince us. But on *this* day, this day when we are downhearted, the tempting voice is alluring. "Lie with me," she says. Again, she repeats her invitation, "Lie with me." And so, could we have blamed Joseph if he had yielded? Could we have blamed Joseph if he had reasoned thus with himself:

Nothing has gone well these past few years. I've been betrayed by my own brothers, deprived of father and mother, sold as a slave. Nothing has gone well recently, but *this* shall go well! In this cold world, I shall get me some warmth. In this harsh world, I shall at last take me some comfort!

But Joseph does not follow this line. He does not lower his guard, relax his virtue, abandon his principles.

Rather, he answers Potiphar's wife in the most excellent of ways. He answers that he does not mean to sin against either God or his neighbor:

⁹There is none greater in this house than I; neither hath he kept back any thing from me but thee, because thou art his wife: how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God? (Genesis 39:9, KJV)

It would have been a fine thing if Potiphar's wife had been moved by this little speech, for it was a noble speech indeed. It would have been a fine thing if she had shown mercy on the young man's struggle. But she showed no mercy. Rather, she persisted in her temptation, "Lie with me."

So, the young man runs away. Sometimes that is the "better part of valor." Run away! Get out of there!

But as he runs, she grabs hold of his robe and keeps it in her scheming hand. Thus, Joseph is twice deprived of his robe -- once by his brothers who strip him of his many-colored coat and now by this woman, who uses the coat against him. Two times Joseph loses his robe, though innocent both times. He is kin to that Greater Joseph who also one day will lose his robe most innocently, with soldiers casting lots over whose it shall be.

Potiphar's wife, then, stands there, spurned by Joseph, but holding his robe. She raises a cry against him, accusing him of trying to force himself upon her. Potiphar, loyal husband that he is, trusts the word of his wife and casts poor Joseph into prison. And that is where we find him at the end of this evening's reading.

Now, a dungeon is a terrible place. But there is a prison even more terrible than that. I speak of slavery to sin. I mean being lost in the house of bondage to sin. Sin issues its orders, "Do this, do that!" And the poor slave jumps to obedience. But not so Joseph. Joseph, it seems, preferred prison to impiety.

And that is how it should be for a Christian. That is one of the chief exhortations of St. Paul, who said,

¹For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1, RSV)

You and I have been bullying about by sin long enough, as if we are at its beck and call continually. But we are not prison-bound in sin. We are baptized, or invited to be so. We are free to fall in step behind Jesus, and he will lead us away from sin, if we will let him.

This coming Sunday's Epistle Lesson includes a tremendous call to liberty from sin. It is such a remarkable apostolic teaching that I am inclined to make it my main text for this upcoming Sunday. St. Paul says this:

¹³There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it. (1 Corinthians 10:13, KJV)

The great thing about Jesus is that he always took that way of escape. So, did Joseph. The way of escape cost Joseph first his robe, then his freedom, yet he remained freest of all, even in that prison, for he counted himself a slave to God. For Jesus, the cost was even higher. Steadfast obedience to his heavenly Father and steadfast love for humanity cost him his robe, his freedom, and ultimately his life. Yet, Jesus Christ was the freest man this world has even known. He did "nothing amiss," and now he is free even of death itself.

In this holy season of Lent, let us look for a way of escape from sin and its traps. Let us follow the example of Joseph of old, and even more of that Greater Joseph, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

(The service continues now with Hymn 106 in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, "In the Hour of Trial.")