Grace and peace from God our Father and from our sinless and Holy Lord, Jesus Christ, amen.

This is a hard Scripture text to preach on. I tried to figure out any way to water it down or soften the message. Mark Twain famously said it wasn’t the parts of scripture that he didn’t understand that bothered him, it was the parts he did understand that kept him up at night… So, I decided to talk about superheroes today instead… As a grandfather I find it hard to keep up with all the superheroes out nowadays. Back in my youth we had a middle aged, slightly overweight black and white superman, a TV version of Batman and Robin that I never missed, and cartoon Spiderman. Spiderman is still popular, but it looks like Superman has taken a backseat to some newer guys like the X-Men, DC Comic Heroes, all the Marvel characters and the supes on the popular Amazon Prime series The Boys. One thing I doubt has changed is that a superhero is someone who doesn’t run from trouble but meets it head on. Actually, not all heroes stick around to take on the bad guys. In fact, in our Scripture lesson today we met someone who was a hero precisely because he ran away. For so many reasons, God fearing believers still today try to be less like all those Superheroes and a whole lot more like Joseph, the hero who ran away.

Let’s review… Joseph was one of twelve sons of Jacob. He was his father’s favorite and the boy who had those dreams about how one day his brothers and parents would bow down to him. This perceived arrogance didn’t sit well with the brothers so when they got their chance, they sold Joseph to slave traders who were going to Egypt. There Joseph became the slave of a man named Potiphar who was the captain of Pharaoh’s guard. He was respected by his master and quickly promoted. Soon he was supervisor over almost everything in Potiphar’s house. There was, of course, one thing that was off limits to Joseph: Potiphar’s wife. Not that Joseph would ever make advances on her, but when Potiphar’s wife saw how handsome Joseph had become, she didn’t just do a little harmless flirting, but came right out and demanded: “Sleep with me!” This was a woman who was obviously used to getting her way. How did our hero respond? He refused. He continued to refuse her and even declined to be in the same room with her. Still the woman persisted. She finally thought she had her chance when one day all the other servants were out of the house leaving her alone with Joseph. This time she grabbed his cloak and demanded: “Sleep with me!” What was poor Joseph to do? Consider his situation. Joseph had been sold into slavery by his brothers and given up for dead by his father. He must have been lonely and now here was someone who appreciated him. If he continued to reject Potiphar’s wife, he might lose his job. Why not give in to this woman’s demands? Plenty of other slaves had done worse things to keep their master’s happy. Perhaps he could just flirt with her. Would that be so dangerous? Joseph did think it would be dangerous. That’s why he not only refused Potiphar’s wife again, but this time he ran from the house. Would Joseph’s will power alone have been able to withstand further propositions, or would his sinful nature have said something like, “You tried to get away. You did the right thing, but I guess it’s just not meant to be. Anyway, it’s her fault for pursuing you like this. Just give in to her demands and maybe she’ll leave you alone!” Joseph didn’t trust himself to stay in the house. So, he fled outside where he could run beyond the reach of that woman’s temptation. In his haste to get away, Joseph left his coat in that woman’s hands and she used it to build a case against him, accusing Joseph of trying to force himself on her. As a result, Potiphar had Joseph thrown in prison. Joseph may have lost his cloak, his job, and for a time, his freedom but he retained a clean conscience. Joseph is a hero for running away.

But why was Joseph so determined not to sleep with Potiphar’s wife? He gave two reasons for his unwillingness to sleep with the boss’s wife. He didn’t want to take advantage of his boss who had given him charge over everything in the household, but more importantly, Joseph realized that sleeping with this woman would not just be a sin against his boss, it would be a sin against his Creator. Joseph knew that as a believer his goal in life was not to have fun, fun, fun., but rather to honor and glorify the God who had created him to serve the people around him.

How do we stack up against Joseph? Do you flee temptation or do we flirt with it? Do you spend more time coming up with excuses as to why the sin you’re about to commit is “permissible” instead of using your energy to plan and carry out your escape? If we’re honest, we’d have to admit we’re all a bit more like thermometers than thermostats. We usually just try to match the mood around us instead of trying to control it. Friends, if we can’t control the situation, and we usually can’t, then we need to run. Running doesn’t make you a coward – no, just the opposite; it makes you a hero, like Joseph.

The best course of action may be to run from temptation even when there doesn’t always seem to be a benefit for doing so. I mean look at Joseph. He ended up being unjustly accused and thrown into prison for doing the right thing. What kind of justice is that? How could a just and righteous God allow such injustice? If Joseph struggled with those thoughts, we don’t hear about it. On the contrary we hear how he made the best of his new situation. He didn’t feel sorry for himself and mope about, angry at God. Instead, when he was given the task of looking after the other prisoners he did this to the best of his ability.

Friends, you might not get an A because you refused to cheat on that exam. You may never get to move out to that acreage because you refuse to pad your timesheet at work or cheat on your taxes. You might not get that great job because you didn’t exaggerate your resume and as a result find yourself stuck in a “dead-end” job. That’s OK. You can serve God faithfully right where you are. In fact, there really is no such thing as a dead-end job – not if you remember you’re not working for a paycheck, but are serving the Creator of the universe. Joseph kept that in mind and was therefore able to serve Potiphar cheerfully even though he had ended up there because his brothers sold him into slavery. Joseph served cheerfully again even when he found himself in imprisoned unjustly. You may have to suffer for a time for doing the right thing. I this life you may never be rewarded of find success as Joseph did. Life isn’t always fair and we don’t always get to see the success we deserve. Even worse, God’s grace falls on the good, the bad, and the ugly. We wine and complain, at least I do… That doesn’t mean God isn’t faithful. Joseph was arrogant, yet he had God’s favor.

What about us? We at least try to be as morally upright as Joseph. If Jesus forgives all of our sins why try so hard to fight temptation? In Old Testament times God made it clear that the animal sacrifices didn’t cover that kind of sinful attitude. Likewise, the forgiveness we receive in Holy Communion on a Sunday morning doesn’t cover a sin we’re plotting for that afternoon. Such an attitude shows lack of saving faith. The writer to the Hebrews put it this way: “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, 27 but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (Hebrews 10:26, 27).

How then can anyone be certain of salvation? Try as I might I can’t seem to remain perfectly patient with my own family, let alone all those sinners I see on the TV… The Psalmist put it this way, “Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. 2 Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him” (Psalm 32:1, 2a). God does not count our sins against us because he counted them against Jesus. Like an umpire who counts our missed swings as strikes against the opponent, God the Father charged our sins against his Son, who should have been our enemy, but made us His friends when he took the blame for our sins. With forgiveness and His own Holy Spirit, Jesus gives us the power to flee, to run away from sin.

So you might be a fan of Spiderman and Batman, but please add Joseph to your list of favorite heroes. Sure, he ran away when the going got tough but that’s what makes him a hero. We can also follow in Joseph’s footsteps by making it a habit of running from temptation into the loving arms of our Savior. May the blood of Jesus cover all our sin and make us acceptable in the eyes of God our Father and our creator. Amen.