

A WONDROUS SILENCE**Sermon for the 2nd mid-week Lenten Service, 2022
Genesis 37:12-36**

Grace and peace to you all from our risen Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

The text for our sermon tonight is Genesis 37:12–36, our First Reading from before: ¹²Joseph’s brothers went to Shechem to graze their father’s flock there. ¹³Israel asked Joseph, “Are your brothers not grazing the flock at Shechem? Come! I shall send you to them.”

Joseph answered him, “Very well.”

¹⁴ Jacob told him, “Please go and see if all is well with your brothers and well with the flock and bring me a report!”

Therefore, he sent him from the Valley of Hebron. When Joseph arrived at Shechem, ¹⁵ a man found him wandering around in the open country. The man asked him, “What are you looking for?”

¹⁶ He said, “I am looking for my brothers. Please tell me where they are grazing the flock!”

¹⁷ The man said, “They have moved away from here. For I heard them say, ‘Let us go to Dothan!’”

So, Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan. ¹⁸ They saw him from a distance, but, before he reached them, they plotted against him to kill him. ¹⁹ They said to one another: “Look! Here comes that master-dreamer! ²⁰ So come now! Let us kill him, throw him into one of the pits and say, ‘A wild animal has devoured him!’ Then we shall see what will become of his dreams.”

²¹ However, when Reuben heard this, he tried to save him from their hands. He said, “Let us not take his life!”

²² Reuben also told them: “Do not shed blood! Throw him into this cistern in the wilderness but do not lay a hand on him!”

Reuben said this to rescue him from their hands, to take him back to his father.

²³ When Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped off Joseph’s tunic, the tunic reaching to the ankles, which he was wearing. ²⁴ Then they took him and threw him into the cistern. It was an empty cistern, without water in it. ²⁵ When they sat down to eat a meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were carrying resinous gum, balm and myrrh. They were on their way to take them down to Egypt. ²⁶ Judah asked his brothers: “What shall we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his death? ²⁷ Come! Let us sell him to the Ishmaelites! Let us not lay our hands on him! For he is our brother, our own flesh.”

His brothers agreed. ²⁸ When the Midianite traders were going past, the brothers pulled Joseph up and lifted him out of the cistern. They sold Joseph for twenty

shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took Joseph to Egypt.

²⁹ When Reuben returned to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not in the cistern, he tore his clothes. ³⁰ He went back to his brothers and said, “The boy is not there! Where do I myself go from here?”

³¹ Then they took Joseph’s tunic, slaughtered a male goat and dipped the tunic in the blood. ³² Then they sent the tunic, which reached to the ankles, back to their father. They said, “We have found this. Find out whether that is your son’s tunic or not!”

³³ Jacob recognised it and said: “It is my son’s tunic! A wild animal has devoured him. Joseph has certainly been torn in pieces.”

³⁴ Jacob tore his clothes, put sackcloth around his waist and mourned for his son for a long time. ³⁵ All his other sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. He said, “No! I shall still be mourning when I go down to my son in the grave.”

This is how his father wept for him.

³⁶ In Egypt the Midianites sold Joseph to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh and a captain of the body-guards.

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.
Dear friends in Christ,

The punishment didn’t fit the crime! What was Joseph guilty of? What had Joseph done that was so bad? What crimes had he committed? Sure, his father, Jacob (aka Israel), loved him more than his eleven brothers and gave him a robe of many colours, but Joseph had no control over that. Sure, he may have been wiser to keep the content of his dreams to himself. Joseph did himself no favours by telling his brothers about how their sheaves of grain bowed down to his sheaf of grain - or about how the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to him.¹ Joseph was rebuked by his father for speaking this way, and that should have settled the matter. Everyone should have moved on. But they didn’t. Joseph’s brothers would mete out their own punishment - a punishment that didn’t fit the crime.

Sibling rivalry and fraternal jealousy soon escalate and spiral out of control. Sin, evil, and wickedness just seem to snowball. Almost overnight, it seems, Joseph’s brothers are suddenly giving serious thought to homicide, to killing their own brother. Premeditated murder in the first degree is casually tossed out for discussion: “**So come now! Let us kill him, throw him into one of the pits and say, ‘A wild animal has devoured him!’ Then we shall see what will become of his dreams.**” Only a last-minute intervention by Reuben prevented them from killing their brother. But Joseph’s brothers found a fate for him almost as bad as death - selling him into slavery for “**twenty shekels of silver.**” Then they proceeded to break the heart of their old father by deceiving him about the death of

¹ Genesis 37:5-11

his dear Joseph. What cold, compassionless hearts those brothers must have had to stand there unmoved while the family patriarch wept with a broken heart, saying: **“I shall still be mourning when I go down to my son in the grave.”**

But don't be too quick to condemn Joseph's brothers, for you and I are more like them than we care to admit. How many broken relationships, how many fractured friendships, can we count in our lives that have disintegrated over a little conflict which quickly escalated into something more? Escalating conflict is what we do best - especially when we feel slighted, disrespected, or treated unfairly. *“I'll see your slight and raise you an insult. I'll put you in your place. I'll knock you down a notch or two to where you belong.”* Or how many old parents do you know like Jacob who are treated treacherously by their children, deceived and disrespected - instead of honoured, loved, and cherished? Where sin is concerned, there is nothing new under the sun. Joseph's brothers would fit right in, in these days, in this culture.

But what's most shocking in tonight's text is not the wickedness of man **but the silence of God**. This family - with all their flaws and failures - were the chosen people of God. All God's promises for life and salvation rested on them. From this family would one day come the Christ. Yet, what does the Lord do to stave off this shameful situation? Nothing. Luther calls this “a wondrous silence.” He writes: *“God lets it happen. He seems quietly still, sleeping, deaf and completely hardened. He has no compassion at all and acts as if He also didn't know this dear [Joseph]. All the angels are also silent as this treasure is snatched away to Egypt... What is God doing here with His chosen ones? ...What is this, that He forsakes them so miserably?”*²

Why does God allow this to happen? Why is He silent? Why doesn't He intervene? Why didn't Jacob see the risk in sending Joseph up to Shechem to find his brothers? It wasn't a wise move. And once Joseph gets to Shechem and can't find his brothers, *who is the stranger who just happens to know that the brothers and their flocks had moved on to Dothan?* If not for that stranger (or was he a stranger?), Joseph may have just turned around and gone back home. In which case, he never would have been sold into slavery, never would have ended up in Egypt, never would have saved his family from famine. There would have been no Pharaoh, no Moses, no exodus. The entire Old Testament - the entire history of our salvation - hinges on that man at Shechem who asked Joseph, **“What are you looking for?”** God just lets it all happen - lets the tragedies and triumphs unfold without so much as lifting a finger. God is silent, but it is *a wondrous silence*. And this silent God is our Lord and our God.

Perhaps St. Paul had Joseph in mind when he wrote to the Romans: *“For all the things that were written long ago were written to teach us, that we might have hope through the patient endurance and encouragement that the Scriptures give us”* (15:4). Joseph teaches

² Joel Baseley, trans., *Luther's Family Devotions for Every Day in the Church Year* [Dearborn, MI: Mark V Publications, 1996], 446).

hope. Joseph teaches us how to receive the silence of God in faith. For we've all wondered, "*Where in the world is God?*" As tragedy unfolds around us, as temptation engulfs us, as conflict escalates and sin spirals out of control, where is God? Surely Joseph asked this as the Ishmaelites hauled him down to Egypt. It's unfair! It's unjust! For poor Joseph, this punishment doesn't fit the crime!

This is all for our comfort - especially as poor Joseph reminds us of poor Jesus. What happened to Joseph foreshadows what happens to Jesus. As Joseph is thrown into the pit and sold into slavery, and hauled into Egypt, Luther summarises it this way: "*Joseph is dead and buried. He has his Good Friday... His father also dies but they are both raised again by the power of God who can even make the dead alive. The heart of the believer must yet live and rise again even if ten worlds bury him*" (Babasey, 447).

Poor Joseph. His punishment is unfair and unjust - and there is no one to rescue and deliver him. There is only a wondrous silence. It is not unlike the silence of Good Friday: "*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*" (Matt. 27:46). The One who cries out from the cross - He, too, is a Son of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is *our* Brother. His punishment and crucifixion do not fit the crime. His punishment is murder in the first degree. It is unfair and unjust. What was Jesus guilty of? Nothing. What had Jesus done that was so bad? Nothing. What crimes had Jesus committed? Not a single one. But Jesus hangs there with nails and thorns for all the crimes of all His brothers and sisters. For you. For me. We do the crime; He gets the punishment. We do the sin; He gets the nails. We push Him away; He stretches His arms wide open to embrace us on a Roman tool of torture. He bears our sins that we may have full and free forgiveness. He goes down into the pit of hell that we may rise again to live forever and ever.

When God is silent in your life, don't lose hope. Know that the faithful always contend with the silence of God. When God seems quiet, and still and distant as life unravels, *trust Him*. When crosses and trials close in around you, remember that God does His best work in a wondrous silence. Remember that He works all things for your eternal good.

Yes, He watched quietly as Joseph sank into the depths - but only so that He could raise up Joseph and, through Joseph, save his people from famine. Through Jesus, God has saved you from your sins. In the quiet splash of your Baptism, in the preaching of His promises, with His body and blood, God is at work for your eternal good and for the salvation of every sibling - for the blessing of every brother and every sister of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.