

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 colors. But Joseph had no control over that. Sure, he might have been wiser to keep the content of his dreams to himself. Joseph did himself no favors 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. 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—punishment that didn't fit the crime.

Sibling rivalry 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 and fratricide. Premeditated murder in the first degree is casually tossed out for discussion: "Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams" (v 20). Only a last-minute intervention by Reuben prevents them from killing their brother. But Joseph's brothers find a fate for him almost as bad as death—selling him into slavery for twenty shekels of silver. And then they proceed to break the heart of their old father by deceiving him about the death of 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 will go to my grave in grief.*"

But don't be too quick to condemn Joseph's brothers, for you and I are more like them than you care to admit. How many broken relationships, how many fractured friendships, can you count in your life that 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 honored, loved, and cherished? Where sin is concerned, there is nothing new under the sun. Joseph's brothers would fit right 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—they 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, the Messiah. Yet, what does the Lord do to stave off this shameful situation, to stop this sin-soaked story? 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?” (Joel Baseley, trans., *Luther's Family Devotions for Every Day in the Church Year* [Dearborn, MI: Mark V Publications, 1996], 446).

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 slighted and angry 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 (if he was merely a stranger?), Joseph might 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. Pharaoh would

have died in the drought, there'd be no need for an exodus. The entire Old Testament—the entire history of our salvation—hinges on that stranger at Shechem who asked Joseph, “What are you seeking?” 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 whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom 15:4). Joseph teaches 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! But God doesn't help him.

This is all for our instruction and hope, for our comfort—especially as poor Joseph points us to 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 summarizes 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” (Baseley, 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?” (Mt 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,

crucifixion, does not fit the crime. His punishment is fratricide in the first degree. It is unfair and unjust. What was Jesus guilty of? Nothing. Certainly much less than Joseph even. 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 might have full and free forgiveness. He goes down into the pit of hell that we might 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, even when He seems silent and distant, 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.