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Scripture

Genesis 37:25-35

²⁵ Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. ²⁶ Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? ²⁷ Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers agreed. ²⁸ When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

²⁹ When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes. ³⁰ He returned to his brothers, and said, "The boy is gone; and I, where can I turn?" ³¹ Then they took Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. ³² They had the long robe with sleeves taken to their father, and they said, "This we have found; see now whether it is your son's robe or not." ³³ He recognized it, and said, "It is my son's robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces." ³⁴ Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. ³⁵ All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." Thus his father bewailed him. ³⁶ Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.

Devotional

Long centuries have passed since the sons of Jacob sold Joseph into slavery. It seems to us an act of the highest cruelty to sell one's own brother into slavery and almost certain death to remove an annoyance or even to eliminate a rival. Knowing that ultimately God uses Joseph's misery to save Israel helps to lessen our shock, to be sure, but perhaps in this season of penitent reflection we should not be too quick to move on from this moment.

What must have been the dark clouds of sin and alienation in the hearts of the sons of Jacob that killing or selling their brother seemed at all acceptable? How far can envy or ambition drive a person? How deep into selfishness and shadow must one crawl to find this act in any way tolerable?

Lest we condemn Judah and his brothers too quickly, we ought to ask ourselves if indeed we have ever "sold out" a brother or sister for convenience, comfort, or profit. Have we ever avoided the cries of the hurting or the lost because it seems far easier to focus on another project or ministry, even a worthwhile one? Have we ever ignored the demands of faithful discipleship because obedience is difficult in a culture which doesn't know the Holy One of Israel . . . and, in so doing, "sold out" Jesus himself?

The act of Judah and his brothers is barbaric and easy to denounce. Perhaps a more fruitful response would be to ponder prayerfully how we as disciples and as the Body of Christ have acted similarly when faced with challenging moments of decision.

Prayer

Eternal God, who finds a way for the broken even in the midst of chaos, forgive us where we have failed to seek obedience, and, by the Spirit's power, grant us your strength and a deep desire for faithfulness, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.