

Joseph is a remarkable figure in the Old Testament. He gives us a picture of Jesus, especially what Jesus would come to do and how He would bring about salvation. In our Old Testament reading, we see the story of Joseph end with beautiful words of reassurance and comfort. The reassurance and comfort that are found there weren't only for Joseph's brothers, but even for God's people – us – still today.

The words come after Joseph's father, Jacob (or Israel), dies. His brothers think that maybe Joseph has been waiting to take revenge until that happens, so they send him a plea for forgiveness, even falling down before him and offering to be his servants. But Joseph, moved to great mercy, tells them this: "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." This is a picture of what Jesus speaks of in our Gospel reading, to be merciful as the Father is merciful.

His brothers certainly had meant evil against Joseph. If you remember his story, Joseph's brothers hated him very early on. Part of this was the favoritism that Jacob showed to him, such as giving him the beautiful coat of many colors. Favoritism certainly is wrong, but it wasn't Joseph's fault; it was his father's. Joseph also gets in trouble for telling on his brothers' bad behavior rather than going along with it.

The final straw comes when Joseph reveals dreams he's been given, where his brothers bow down to him. Again, Joseph didn't make these up; they were given to him by God. And as we see in our text and also earlier, his brothers do end up bowing down to him.

All this brings out hatred for Joseph in the hearts of his brothers. As he comes out to visit them, they plot to kill him. The eldest, Reuben, convinces them to merely throw Joseph into a pit, thinking that he'll come back later and rescue him. But when Reuben goes away, they take Joseph and sell him into slavery for twenty pieces of silver.

Picture that scene: Joseph, thinking his brothers had changed their mind as they pull him out of the pit, only to realize they're selling him into slavery. He pleads and begs and cries, but the pleas fall on deaf ears as the brothers laugh and pocket their money. When Joseph says they meant it for evil, he's not exaggerating.

And remember, the cruel actions of his brothers led to even greater suffering for Joseph that they weren't aware of. Joseph gets ripped away from everything and everyone he knows, framed for attempted rape, and forgotten in prison by someone he helped. And every single time, Joseph's done nothing to deserve it.

But as Joseph points out, "God meant it for good." Through all the setbacks and tragedies that Joseph endured, the Holy Spirit kept the flame of faith alive in his heart, so that he could trust that God

had not abandoned him but was working through all of it for good. Did Joseph know exactly what God was doing when he was trapped in the bottom of the pit, or in a slave caravan bound of Egypt, or forgotten in Pharaoh's prison? No! No, he didn't! But he knew that God was still with him, guiding even the lowest points of his life to bring about good.

And what good the Lord brought about! At the lowest point, forgotten in prison, the Lord raises Joseph up, giving him the ability to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, which then leads Pharaoh to exalt Joseph to second-in-command of Egypt. At thirty years old, this son of a wandering herdsman is effectively running the day-to-day operations of the most powerful empire in the world.

Guided by God's wisdom, Joseph sees that the seven years of plenty isn't wasted or traded away for frivolous riches, but instead is stored for the coming seven years of famine. Once that famine hits, not only Egypt, but the surrounding peoples also affected by it are able to buy food and not starve. Thousands, maybe even millions, of people are preserved by God through Joseph. And this includes even Joseph's family. In an incredible twist foreseen only by the Lord, the lives of the sons of Jacob are saved by the very person they at one point sought to kill.

By the time of our reading, Joseph can look back and see how the hand of God was at work. He can see how the Lord showed great mercy in keeping many alive. And led by this mercy, Joseph can gladly forgive his brothers. He sees how God has cared for him through everything, and how God has cared for countless other people through him, and so he gladly promises to care for his brothers and their little ones.

Here with Joseph, we've given a wonderful picture of what forgiveness is. He doesn't ignore what his brothers did, nor excuse it; he acknowledges it as evil. But he also recognizes that God has been merciful to him and turned that evil into good. In light of that mercy, Joseph willingly forgives his repentant brothers and does great good to them.

The mercy and forgiveness that are seen in Joseph point us very clearly to Christ. Jesus Himself could just as easily speak those words of Joseph: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."

When we recall the earthly ministry of Christ, how often were people intending evil for him? As a child, King Herod tried to kill Him. Later on, the people of His hometown of Nazareth wanted to throw Him off a cliff. The Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, and law-experts were constantly grumbling against Him, trying to catch Him in traps, and plotting to kill Him. All of it flows from Satan, fueling the sinful pride of men in an effort to destroy the Lord's Christ and keep Him from bringing salvation to men.

During our Lord's Passion, it would seem that the devil had in fact succeeded. Jesus is betrayed by one of His own inner circle, framed by the Jewish religious rulers, and sentenced to death by a Roman governor unwilling to stand up to the mob. Though totally innocent, Jesus is made to suffer one of the worst deaths imaginable, and even more than that, He has the divine wrath of God poured out upon Him as He hangs there.

There we have a connection back to God's people in Egypt. There were three days of darkness before the death of the firstborn secured Israel's freedom. On Good Friday, the whole world goes dark for three hours before the Firstborn, even the only begotten Son, dies to set people free from sin.

But despite so many, even the devil himself, meaning all this for evil, God meant it for good. Indeed, this had been God's plan from the very moment Adam and Eve plunged humanity into sin and death. The Son, the Seed of the woman, had come, and although the serpent had managed to bruise His heel, Jesus had crushed the serpent's head. Satan's accusations against God's people were all answered by the innocent blood which Jesus had shed. The Suffering Servant had come, as Isaiah had foretold: "Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities." All those evil intentions had backfired, leading to eternal life for all who believe.

You have to wonder if, when Jesus descended into hell to proclaim His victory, He spoke the words of Joseph to the devil. "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." Unlike Joseph's brothers, who were repentant, the impenitent prince of demons would've been enraged as Christ broke down hell's gates and revealed him to be powerless over those to whom God granted life. All those who, like Joseph's brothers, repent of their sins would find themselves cleansed by the God who in mercy had offered Himself for them. The greatest evil had been turned into the greatest good.

Still today, the words of Joseph ring true concerning the working of our gracious God and Savior. All sorts of things are meant for evil against God's people. The world is constantly slandering the Church as out-of-touch or hateful or backward for holding to God's word. Individual Christians are attacked in their own lives for rightly making the Christian faith not just an outward label but a way of life.

St. Peter, someone who would know a thing or two about enduring evil, writes concerning the world's attacks: "With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you." Jesus Himself plainly says, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you."

In our time and place, this can be especially difficult, as for a long time our society respected the Christian faith and was influenced by it. Now that society is turning away from it, Christians who previously enjoyed fitting in with the world now struggle as they find themselves outsiders. We aren't used to having the culture and its institutions mean things for evil against us, and we're tempted to give into them, letting the world define good and evil, right and wrong, rather than God's word.

In such times, God has given us the heroes of the faith to toward as examples. How often did it seem that everything was against Joseph – his family, his employers, his neighbors? Yet Joseph remained faithful, and the Lord turned all that evil to good, both for him and for many. Likewise, consider all the hardships suffered by the prophets and apostles, which the Lord turned to good. Or think about the numerous Christians who have suffered for the sake of Jesus and through whom God

has brought great blessing. Above all, remember the example of Christ Himself, whose suffered evil that was then turned to great good.

God does not change. His love, His power, and His wisdom which He has used to care for His people of all times and places is the same love, power, and wisdom that He uses to care for you. When hard times come, when you find yourself in trials, then rejoice! Not because the trial or hardship itself is a source of joy, but because you can know that God has already determined how He will bring good out of it. In Baptism, He has made you His children, and our Father cannot forget His children.

As you remember God's faithfulness, remember also His gift of forgiveness. Because Joseph trusted in the Lord and in His mercy, he could show great mercy to those who meant evil against Him. When his brothers repented, He could gladly forgive them, because He knew that God had forgiven Him. This is why Luther writes about forgiveness as he does in the Small Catechism. As Christians who have been shown God's great mercy and forgiveness, "So we too will sincerely forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us."

We need not try to excuse or justify evil, trying to call evil good and good evil, which the Bible forbids. Rather, we trust that in repentance, the mercy and forgiveness of God wipe away evil. In faith, we trust that our Lord will turn things intended for evil into things that bring about His good and gracious will.

Our Lord forgives us for the sake of Jesus, and as He illustrated through Joseph, He will provide for us and our little ones. He will keep us alive, today and into eternity.

In the name of Jesus, amen.