

Baptism of our Lord  
January 8, 2012

Grace and peace to you this day in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The story of Joseph and his brothers is the concluding episode of the family story that begins with Abraham and Sarah in the book of Genesis. Joseph was the eleventh of twelve sons born to Jacob, one of Abraham and Sarah's grandsons. Even though he was quite a ways down in the pecking order of those twelve sons, Joseph was his father's favorite, most likely because of the four women with whom Jacob fathered children; Joseph was the first-born of the woman Jacob truly loved. Jacob was quite open with the favoritism he showed to Joseph, which naturally aroused the anger of his older ten brothers. The gift of the *Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* made famous by Andrew Lloyd Webber was but one of the ways Jacob favored Joseph over the rest.

Joseph, for his part, seemed to enjoy the preferential treatment shown him by his father. When he was seventeen he had a couple of dreams in which he saw a future where he would have complete superiority over all his brothers and they would bow down to his authority. When Joseph flaunted these dreams before his elder siblings, the ten older sons decided they'd had just about enough of their little brother, so they decided to kill him. They hatched a plan in which they would do him in while they were all off in the fields tending to their father's flocks. They were just about ready to do the deadly deed when Rueben, the eldest, had second thoughts about murdering one of their own. He convinced the rest of the boys to instead sell Joseph to a caravan of merchants, which they did, and Joseph ended up being sold as a slave to the household of the Pharaoh of Egypt. The ten older brothers meanwhile returned home with Joseph's famous coat soaked in goat's blood and told their father Joseph had been attacked and killed by a wild animal. Their father, of course, was devastated and swore he would remain in mourning the rest of his life.

Joseph, however, even though he was a slave, became quite successful in Egypt. He rose to the rank of overseer in the house of the Pharaoh's captain of the guard, but it was his ability to interpret dreams that brought Joseph the greatest windfall. After Joseph had been in Egypt for several years, the Pharaoh had two dreams that none of his advisors could successfully interpret. Joseph and his ability to interpret dreams were brought to the Pharaoh's attention. The Pharaoh had Joseph brought before him, and Joseph not only told him what his dreams meant, namely, there were to be seven years of great plenty in the land followed by seven years of extreme famine, he even went on to suggest a plan on how to use the good years to prepare for the bad. The Pharaoh was so impressed with Joseph that he not only followed his plan, he appointed Joseph as overseer of the project as well as governor over the entire nation.

The events of the next fourteen years happened just as Joseph said they would. Seven years of incredibly bountiful harvests were followed by seven years of terrible famine—seven years of hardship for which Egypt was suitably prepared. Not only was Egypt able to feed itself during

those years of famine, but Joseph had stored so much food during the good years that Egypt was able to provide supplies to neighboring nations who were starving. Joseph's family back in the land of Canaan was one of those starving neighbors, so Jacob eventually sent his ten oldest sons to Egypt to buy food. When they came before Joseph they did not recognize him but he recognized them, and after a great deal of intrigue, he revealed to them who he was. They were not only incredibly shocked, they were certain that Joseph would have them killed in revenge for what they had done to him. Joseph did no such thing. Instead, he had his father and all his brothers and their families move to Egypt where they lived in great wealth.

The most poignant scene for me, though, of this saga of Joseph and his brothers comes at the very end of the story, after their father, Jacob, dies. The ten older brothers believed that the reason Joseph had been so hospitable to them was for the sake of their father, and that after their father was gone, Joseph would finally extol his revenge on them. So after Jacob died, the ten older brothers threw themselves at Joseph's feet and begged his forgiveness. What Joseph said to them was this: "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way, the book of Genesis says, Joseph reassured his brothers and spoke kindly to them.

We gather this day to celebrate our Lord's baptism and in so doing, we celebrate the gift of baptism itself, and what this gift is meant to bring to our living. Even though the story of Joseph and his brothers is not directly a story about baptism—it took place long before the practice of baptism was ever established—it does lift up for us a most essential element of what baptism is meant to do in us. When we think about the gifts given to us in baptism, we think about things like the forgiveness of sins, the promise given of our resurrection to eternal life, the establishment of a relationship God makes with us forever. Baptism is about God touching our lives through this sacrament—touching our lives and changing us—touching our lives and making us into something we were not before. Baptism is meant to be something that changes the way we live life and the way we see life—a change that is more consistent with how God sees life and how God lives life. In baptism, it is not just we ourselves that are baptized. All of life is meant to be baptized for us.

"Even though you intended to do me harm, God intended it for good." That's what Joseph said, in the end, to his brothers. Joseph looked at the circumstances of his life, and he saw those circumstances differently than his brothers did. Certainly they did intend him harm and their actions were evil. But Joseph believed that in all things God's intentions are for the good, and Joseph lived in the circumstances of his life for that good. In a certain sense what he did was to see life through God's eyes and not just his own.

This, I believe, is precisely what baptism is meant to do for our own living. Baptism calls us to see our lives through God's eyes and not just our own. Baptism calls us to live our lives with a sense of what God may be doing, and not just with a sense of what we or others around us might be doing. We live our lives each day with all kinds of intentions—intentions we might

have for ourselves—intentions others might have for us. Baptism calls us to think about what God's intentions might be for the day, and it calls us to live in the light of what we understand God's intentions to be. One thing we know for certain about these intentions of God's: they are always good. For us, life itself becomes baptized when we look for God's good each day and allow this good to determine what we see and how we live.