In the Name of the Father, the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Everywhere, mercy precedes.”¹ Everywhere, mercy precedes.

To preach on Genesis is an intimidating task. The book of Genesis occupied Luther for the last ten years of his life. In fact, when he began, he said, “I shall linger over the exposition of this book and shall die in the process of doing so.”² Well, he died three months after finishing, so he was almost right. Augustine twice started a commentary on Genesis, neither time did he finish it. Instead, he wrote two books of questions on Genesis. It is a book that tells what are in many ways obscure and strange stories, but stories in which the church has always seen unfathomable depths. There always seem to be more riches to be mined in the stories of Genesis. It is a well that can never be emptied of its contents.

To come to a better grasp of the beauties of Joseph’s forgiveness of his brothers in our story, I want to try to recount, as quickly as I can, the life of Joseph that led up to this powerful scene. Joseph, if you remember, is the youngest son of Jacob, the same one who wrestled with the God-man and was given the name “Israel.” Joseph had many brothers, but of all the brothers, Jacob “loved Joseph more than any of his other children” (Gen. 37:3). Because of his love for Joseph, Jacob fashions for him a splendidly colored coat. Joseph’s brothers see this, and because of Jacob loving him more than his brothers, his brothers hate him.

Then Joseph has two dreams. In the first, he is binding wheat with his brothers, “and lo,” says Joseph when he tells his brothers of the dream, “my sheaf [of wheat] arose and stood upright; and … your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf” (37:7). Not surprisingly, his brothers don’t like the thought of bowing down before their youngest brother. And so, Genesis says, “they hated him yet more for his dreams and for his words” (37:8). In a second dream, which he also tells to his brothers and also his father, “the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me” (37:9). His father, Jacob, rebukes him, saying, “what is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?” (37:10). And his brothers, Genesis says, “were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind” (37:11).

Then one day, when Joseph’s brothers were keeping the sheep in a distant land, Jacob sends Joseph to them, to “see if it is well with [his] brothers” as Jacob says to him, and to “bring word back to [Jacob]” (37:14). Joseph wanders in the fields looking for them, and when he finds them, Genesis says, “they saw him afar off, and before he came near to them

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they conspired against him to kill him. … Come now,” they said, “let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild beast has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams” (37:20). The eldest brother convinces the others that they shouldn’t kill him outright, but throw him into a pit. He said this because he wanted to save Joseph. But then the brothers saw a caravan carrying spices to Egypt. So, instead of leaving him in a pit to die, they decided to make a little money off of their brother. Here is what the text says, and note the irony in Holy Scripture, “Come,” says Judah, “let us sell him, … and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh” (37:27). So for twenty pieces of silver, Joseph was sold as a slave by his own flesh and blood.

To hide what they had done from their father, they took the splendid coat that the father had fashioned for his son, tore it up, dipped it in the blood of a goat, and presented it to their father, who wept and mourned, and refused to be comforted at the death of his beloved son.

So Joseph was sold as a slave to a man named Potiphar, captain of Pharaoh’s guards. But the Lord was with Joseph, and everything that he did the Lord prospered. So Potiphar entrusted the whole of his household to him. But Potiphar had a wife, who repeatedly attempted to seduce Joseph. Joseph remained upright, did not succumb to her. Then one day, says Holy Scripture, “she caught him by his garment, saying, ‘Lie with me.’ But he left his garment in her hand,” and fled (39:11–12). She then lied to her husband, saying that Joseph had tried to lay with her, using the garment as a proof. So the captain of the guard placed Joseph in prison.

But yet in prison, the Lord was with him, such that even though he was a prisoner, the keeper of the prison entrusted all of the other prisoners to Joseph’s care, and the keeper of the prison “paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph’s care, because the Lord was with him” (39:23). While in prison, Pharaoh’s chief cup-bearer and chief baker became his prison mates. One night they each had a troubling dream. They told the dreams to Joseph, who then told them what would befall each of them in but a few days. And precisely what Joseph had said took place: one was hanged, while the other was restored to serve Pharaoh.

For two more years Joseph is imprisoned, but then Pharaoh himself is given a dream. The chief cup-bearer tells Pharaoh about Joseph who has the ability to interpret dreams. So Pharaoh summons Joseph, who then interprets Pharaoh’s dreams, foretelling seven years of rich harvests and great plenty, followed by seven years of great famine. But then Joseph goes beyond interpreting the dream, and tells Pharaoh how the seven years of plenty give opportunity to gather reserves for the seven years of famine. Pharaoh agrees, and appoints Joseph to this task, saying, “Since God has shown you all this, there is none so … wise as you are; you shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command” (41:39–40).

And as Joseph interpreted, so happened in Egypt. There were seven years of bumper crops. So in those seven years, says Holy Scripture, “Joseph stored up grain in great abundance, like the sand of the sea, until he ceased to measure it, for it could not be measured” (41:49). But these seven years came to an end, and were followed by seven years of famine. Everywhere, there was famine. And when the Egyptians cried out to Pharaoh for bread, Pharaoh said, “Go to Joseph; what he says to you, do” (41:55). And
likewise, all the earth, Genesis says, all the earth came to Joseph to buy grain.

Well this famine affected Jacob and his family too. So Jacob told his sons to go to Egypt and buy grain, but he kept his youngest son Benjamin home with him. The brothers go, and come before Joseph, bowing down before him yet not knowing that it was their brother. Just as Joseph’s first dream had predicted, Joseph’s brothers came and bowed down before him. Joseph sees that it is his brothers that are before him but, Scripture says, “he treated them like strangers and spoke roughly to them” (42:7). Joseph accuses them of being spies. To show their innocence, Joseph tells them that they must bring their youngest brother to Egypt, else surely they are lying spies. When the brothers here this, they said to one another, “in truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he besought us and we did not listen; therefore is this distress come upon us” (42:21). But they did not know that he could understand them, thinking that he was an Egyptian. But he did understand them, and hearing them, “he turned away from them and wept” (42:24). He then places one of the brothers in prison and sends the rest home with all the grain they can carry. When the brothers minus the one in prison return to their father Jacob, Jacob despairs, and refuses to let them take his youngest son Benjamin back to Egypt, thinking that he would lose another son if he did.

But because of the severe famine, eventually Jacob had no choice but to send his sons back to buy grain. So he sends all of his sons, including Benjamin, to Egypt. When Joseph sees that his brothers have returned, he prepares a great feast for them in his own home. But they remained afraid, thinking that Joseph was going to kill them. When Joseph comes to his home and sees his brothers, they bow down before him once again. But Joseph sees his brother Benjamin, his brother that he had never seen before, and he is overcome. “Then,” says Genesis, “Joseph hurried out, for his heart yearned for his brother, and he sought a place to weep” (43:30). And when Joseph returns, he feasts with his brothers, who still have no idea who it is that is before them.

The next morning, Joseph gives instructions that they should be given as much grain as they can carry home. But in the sack of Benjamin, Joseph instructs his steward to place Joseph’s own silver cup. After the brothers depart, Joseph’s steward finds them and accuses them of stealing. The brothers rightly deny it, saying that whoever is found with the cup shall die, and all of the rest shall be slaves. When the sacks are searched, the cup was found to be in Benjamin’s sack, the very one that their father thought he would lose. So the brothers return to Joseph’s house. Falling down before him, again fulfilling Joseph’s dream, they say, “What shall we say to my lord? What shall we speak? Or how can we clear ourselves? God has found out the guilt of your servants; behold, we are my lord’s slaves, both we and he also in whose hand the cup has been found” (44:16). The guilt that the brothers confess that God has found out is not the theft of the cup. For they were innocent of that. The guilt that has been found out is what they had done to Joseph. But he responds to them by saying that they need not all be slaves, just the one that stole the cup. He says this, not just because he is not interested in slaves. He says this because he desires the repentance of his brothers. Joseph doesn’t want his brothers to repent because he wants revenge, Joseph wants his brothers to repent for their own sakes. Unbeknownst to his brothers, Joseph is drawing them into reconciliation, into restoration. Joseph is drawing
them into true fellowship, fellowship that doesn’t overlook sin, but fellowship that looks squarely at sin, and forgives it.

But the brothers who at one time sold one of their own because of their father’s unique love for him, giving up their youngest brother is now worse than their own enslavement. And so Judah, the same one who had the idea of selling Joseph into slavery in the first place, Judah takes Joseph aside and asks that Benjamin be spared and Judah enslaved in his place. What a wonderful reversal! The brother who was the lead in betraying Joseph, in taking him away from his father, now takes the lead in assuring Benjamin’s return to his father, in protecting his youngest brother. And here, at last, is where we meet up with our reading.

“Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him; and he cried, ‘Make every one go out from me.’ So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept aloud, so that the Egyptians heard it. … And Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am Joseph!”’ (45:1–3). The weeping that he had done in private, hidden from his brothers, he now could show to them. The love that he had for his brothers could now be shown. The brother who was dead, who had been lost, is restored to them. But, equally beautiful, the brothers who had betrayed Joseph, who as good as murdered him, were restored to Joseph and to one another.

But the brothers were frightened, for they knew what they had done to him: their guilt and their shame stood before them. “So Joseph said to his brothers, ‘Come near to me, I pray you.’ And they came near. And he said, ‘I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. … God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God”’ (45:4–8). Joseph knows that the Lord was at work in this, that it was God who had sent Joseph before his brothers. Joseph had seen how everywhere he went the mercy of God preceded him, and he wants now his brothers to see too that everything they had done, everywhere they had gone, God’s mercy had preceded. “Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept; and Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them” (45:14–15). Each of the brothers is embraced and wept upon in turn, covering their shame and their offense with his love and his tears.

But the brothers were not immediately able to receive this love, this forgiveness. So after Joseph makes himself known, they return to their father and bring him to Egypt to remain. But after seventeen more years, Jacob, their father, dies. And the brothers think that now Joseph’s anger will finally be unleashed against them; now his trust in God’s providence even in their betrayal will prove to be false; now his forgiveness will prove to have been only deferred vengeance. So after Jacob dies the brothers again bow down before Joseph and say that they will be his slaves. Again, Joseph weeps before them, and tells them one of the greatest statements in all of Scripture: he says, “Fear not, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good” (50:20). You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. And surely if God meant this for good, then forgiveness is not just one possibility amongst many, it is the only possibility that makes any sense at all, if God can bring good out of evil; it is the only rational response if
God’s mercy can truly overcome evil. If the mercy of God preceded their wicked actions and intentions, then mercy too could precede them in every word that Joseph speaks to them, mercy could precede in every thing that Joseph does to them.

With the short time that I have left, I would like to offer just a few further reflections on this story. As one church father put it in a sermon on Joseph, I will try to “offer a few words, as though offering you crumbs from huge loaves.”  

But as these crumbs come to us from the very Bread of Life himself, who came down from heaven, we can trust that though we may not be entirely satisfied, we will be sustained until that day when we shall feast without end.

The church, and Israel before her, has seen great mystery in Joseph’s dreams. The first dream is fulfilled no less than three times in the story. But the second dream remains unfulfilled in Joseph’s life. The dream, if you recall, has the sun and moon and eleven stars bowing down before Joseph. Jacob interprets this dream as saying that Jacob and Rachel and Joseph’s eleven brothers were to bow down before him. But, when Jacob and Joseph’s brothers bow down before Joseph, Rachel had been dead for well over a decade. The church has seen that this dream is finally only fulfilled in Christ. And if that is true, then there is something finally unfulfilled about Joseph in his own life. This does not mean that Joseph is a failure, far from it, quite the opposite actually. But it means that to see Joseph's full and final purpose, we look to Jesus, we look to the one that Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, called “the true Joseph.”

Like Joseph, who was uniquely loved by Jacob his father, Jesus is the only-begotten and well-Beloved Son of our Heavenly Father. Like Joseph who was given a splendid coat to show his father’s unique love, the Word of God took on a coat of flesh, not to be made of many colors but to unite in one body Jews and Gentile alike. Like Joseph who went out to search for his brothers and bring a report back to his father about their well-being, Jesus came from heaven to earth, “deigning to become our brother, he arrived amongst us,” to search for his brothers and sisters and to make all things well with us. As Joseph wandered in the field looking for them, Jesus Christ would endure forty days of wandering in the wilderness, being tempted for our sakes. Like Joseph who was betrayed by his brothers and thrown into a pit, Jesus was betrayed by his closest followers, the disciples, and went down into the pit of hell. Like Joseph who had his coat stripped from him and torn and dipped in the blood of goat, Jesus’ body was torn and beaten, and became our sacrificial lamb. So too could this be followed throughout the life of Joseph and the true Joseph. As Joseph repeatedly forgave his brothers so that they might be restored to him, so too Jesus Christ does not cease forgiving us, weeping tears of joy when we come to him, restoring us to fellowship and communion with himself.

Everywhere mercy preceded in the life of Joseph and his brothers, because

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3 Saint Caesarius of Arles, “On the Blessed Patriarch Joseph,” Sermon 93.1,
4 Augustine, Book of Questions on the Heptateuch, 1.123; Caesarius of Arles, Sermon 89; Ambrose, On Joseph 2.8; Luther, Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 31–37, 338–343; Nicholas of Lyra, Ad Genesius, op. cit.
everywhere, the love of God in Christ precedes our shortcomings and our failures, everywhere the forgiveness of God in Christ precedes our sin and our wickedness, so that Jesus Christ might embrace us and love us, and so that we might receive his love and forgiveness with joy and thanksgiving, and live with him in his kingdom where there will be an everlasting feast, to the glory of his Father, with the Holy Spirit, forever and ever. Amen.