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The Transfiguration served for Peter, James, and John as a way to strengthen their faith so that when times of trial during the passion of our Lord came, they might remember that they had seen his glory, that they had heard the voice of the Father, and that saw the testimony of Moses and Elijah. At first glance, today's first reading seems a bit odd, but something similar is happening. Abraham is asking God how he will know that God will ultimately keep his word, and God gives Abraham a dream. A man of deep faith, God is about to strengthen his faith even more. Abraham takes animals split in two, which was how a covenant would be made in ancient near eastern cultures. Then, in his dream, God appears as a torch. Abraham did not walk down the middle, but only God, which meant the covenant was God's obligation to fulfill for Abraham. It is a unilateral covenant. God was saying, "I myself will ensure this," and "May this happen to me if I do not do it." Since God cannot be split in two, Abraham knew for certain that it would be fulfilled.

Of course, we know that God did break himself open for us on Good Friday on the cross, when Christ gives over his spirit, separated from his body. This is precisely how God fulfilled his promise, creating a new and everlasting covenant that the Gentiles were a part of. Therefore, all Christians are children of Abraham now as well, and God desires that all people become spiritual descendants of Abraham. The Kingdom that Christ has founded is not for one small nation but for all the nations, and this kingdom, while fully in heaven, as Saint Paul says about our citizenship today in the second reading, is also, "on earth as it is in heaven."

Over the past three weeks, I have spoken a bit about the Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, although because I'm not at every Mass, you have not heard what I have said. I remarked that prayer is where we encounter the God who loves us unconditionally, and if we are still hiding our true selves from God, we must spend time in prayer knowing that He does not want us to hide from him. I spoke about how fasting is about disciplining our will to be strong to resist when real temptations come and also serves to refocus our vision on God, to lay aside distractions.

Today I would like to look at almsgiving. In some ways, money can become a real distraction for us, and almsgiving serves to detach us even from that. It serves to show an act of faith in God that we will be provided for and can give up some of what we have. Further, all of us are children of Abraham, making us all brothers and sisters. To the question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" asked in Genesis, God answers with a resounding, "Yes." We are told we are to be judged precisely by how we treat those most in need, how we are able to see God in them and respond to them. "Lord, when did I see you hungry and feed you?"

One opportunity for almsgiving that we practice in the United States is Rice Bowl, a program designed by Catholic Relief Services, the international humanitarian organization sponsored by the US bishops. Money from Rice Bowl goes to help many people, and you can find stories on the website, such as that of Annet, a Sudanese refugee who because of violence fled to Uganda with his younger siblings. CRS is building homes for these refugees and teaching them how to farm that they might be able to make it on their own. Or stories like that of Christyan who fled his home country of Sri Lanka at age 14 due to civil war. When he was 30, he returned, finding the family farm in shambles. “For a refugee, returning home after so many years can be challenging. That’s why CRS is helping Christyan and others like him rebuild their lives. That means helping to clear overgrown sections of farmland and ensuring those farms have access to water. Christyan is now growing rice, pumpkin and peanuts. Because of the assistance from CRS, Christyan can give his family things he never had” like a Catholic education. He is one of the people Rice Bowl helps.

There are recipes for simple Lenten meals that can be used, an app for meditations and prayers, and many associated activities. And a portion of the money stays locally at to help families in the United States.

Lent is a time for almsgiving, and not necessarily to CRS. The question we have to ask ourselves in Lent is, as we encounter the mercy of God, how do we practice the corporal works of mercy to those in need? How are we treating our brothers and sisters, all the children of Abraham throughout the whole world?