

Second Sunday of Lent – Cycle C
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – March 17, 2019
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In the movie, and later the television series, “Paper Chase,” the late John Housman portrayed Professor Kingsfield, a stern and demanding law school teacher. Kingsfield’s subject was “Contracts,” a course that law students have, over the years, learned to dread. You see, unlike other subjects, where the goal was to memorize the rules or correctly identify the right issues, the Contracts course demanded that you look at a given situation differently than you might have otherwise. You had to change your perspective. Professor Kingsfield would boast that you could only pass his course if you left “thinking like a lawyer.” I spent my own time in a Contracts course – not my highest grade in law school, I must say – which is ironic given that I spent most of my legal career drafting contracts. To a certain extent, I suppose I did change my approach, I did leave thinking like a lawyer. And try as I might to think like an ordinary human being again, or like a priest for that matter, I still find myself, on occasion, thinking like a lawyer. Most people see a legal document and look at the subject matter – what it’s about. As an attorney, I see a legal document and I automatically look for mutual promises and representations, for adequate consideration, for signatures and witnesses and maybe notarization and recording – all of the things that the law may require of a binding contract.

I suspect that at least some of the readers of Genesis were looking for the same thing. In our first reading, the author describes in detail how God instructed Abraham to split animals in half. As Abraham waited in a trance-like prayer, God symbolically passed between the halves – an ancient means of confirming a binding agreement. Yes, the author of Genesis wanted us to know that God made with Abraham more than a mere promise; indeed, more than a mere contract. On that day, God made a covenant with Abraham. A covenant is a relationship. People break laws and legal contracts all the time. Yet when that happens, the wronged party merely prosecutes or sues or walks away. Not so with a covenant. A covenant is deeper. A covenant is more profound. Time and again, Abraham and his descendants rebelled, disobeyed the commandments, broke their covenant with God. Yet God did not walk away. He did not destroy them. Instead, each time, God patiently reaffirmed his covenant with Israel. He forgave them because the covenant with Abraham and Moses and David and all of Israel – the covenant of the Old Testament was formed in love. In that covenant, God promised Israel a Savior – and he delivered.

In our gospel today, Jesus helps three of his disciples to understand that he is the fulfillment of the promise. In the midst of their prayer, in the midst of their

dreamlike sleep, a glorified Jesus appears to them between Moses and Elijah – between the Law and the Prophets – the cornerstones of the faith of ancient Israel – and the voice of God is heard, “This is my chosen Son. Listen to him.” In Luke’s gospel, the account of the Transfiguration of Jesus appears shortly after Jesus first announced to his disciples that he would have to suffer and die. He wanted to reassure them that in spite of all of the pain they would face, God’s covenantal relationship with them would endure. The crucifixion would be a step on the journey, but not the last one. In the wonder of the Transfiguration, God showed the disciples that Jesus’ journey would end not in humiliation or defeat, but in glory. God would honor the new covenant established in the blood of Christ.

The Father’s message to us is the same. In spite of the pain and hardship of our own lives, though we confront illness and suffering and sin, God’s love for us endures. He is ever-faithful to us and asks only that we be faithful to him. We need not worry about enforcing our covenant with God – God has already fulfilled his end of the bargain. God continually offers us a taste of the new covenant in the body and blood of Christ we are invited to share. In the sacraments of the Church, God offers us grace – his very life – as our means of salvation. We need only receive it. Ah, but there’s the problem. You see, if we open ourselves to God’s grace, if we let him in, we will be changed – we will be as transfigured as Jesus was – and we cannot have that. To be transfigured means to turn our backs on the sin we enjoy so much. To be transfigured means to set aside the cares and worries – and the pleasures and delights of this world to concentrate on the hope and glory of the next. To be transfigured means to trust in God and not in ourselves. When expressed in those terms, our covenant has a high price. It is a difficult bargain. We would be happy to enjoy the benefits of the contract without the burdens – and often we try to do that as we routinely come forth to receive the Eucharist without giving a passing thought to living a life of mercy and charity or even daily personal prayer. We don’t mind our covenant relationship with God as long as it does not impact our lives – and being prayerful or merciful or charitable would certainly impact our lives. Yet surely salvation is worth the price. The immensity of God’s love should be incentive enough to embrace the new covenant, to embrace discipleship, to embrace a life of prayer and sacrifice. Discipleship is not – Catholicism is not – a once in a while experience. It is a way of life. In this season of Lent, as we reflect continually on the sacrifice of Christ, may we renew our commitment to this way of life. May we be willing to sacrifice just a little, to open ourselves to the transforming love of God we can encounter only when we open our hearts to prayer and service. This Lent, may we open our hearts to God. May we allow ourselves to be transfigured by the redemptive love of our Savior.