

When I settled on the topic for my comments today, I looked in my office-paper recycling bin for, but did not find, a copy to hold up for you of “Tucson” magazine, which I suspect bears a strong resemblance to whatever is the local magazine in Scottsdale or Phoenix, and would bear resemblance to a “Florence” magazine, if there were one. What with the heavy concentration of retirees — I am easily of that age, just not of that level of good sense, — there are plenty of advertisements for orthopedic surgery groups and dentists doing dentures and dental implants, and, well, cosmetic surgeons and dermatologists (one of whom I see because you know what the desert sun can do; I had one of those carcinomas removed from my nose last summer). But the dermatologists and some salons now are also advertising and offering a cosmetic injection, maybe some of you ladies, and almost certainly daughters and granddaughters, have received some, injections of a substance known as *Botox*.

The name, “Botox,” comes from conflating two frightening words: *botulism*, a horrible disease, and *toxin*, or poison. Botox is a form of the toxin in the botulism disease, and it works by causing a paralysis which, in the levels and forms in which Botox is used, is very localized and temporary. For instance, while he was alive and in assisted living near us in Tucson, I would take Patricia’s dad, who among other things suffered from Parkinson’s, which caused drooling, to the VA, where a doctor would inject a particular form of Botox into his saliva gland to stop the drooling for about three months.

Another form of the Botox toxin is what is used cosmetically, and if I understand correctly, used mainly to keep women from furrowing their brow by temporarily paralyzing the nerves in their foreheads; effectively, Botox hides wrinkles! That would leave me unable to express displeasure, but it leaves at least some women feeling they look younger, that their appearance is somehow *transfigured* from what it would otherwise be.

Transfigured. The Sunday before Lent is always *Transfiguration* Sunday; Transfiguration Sunday celebrates the event that was described in our Gospel lesson from Mark and is repeated in Matthew and Luke. But it is a singularly strange event, and before I try to emphasize what I think we might learn from it, I want to engage in a bit of that “Bible Study” that I think is necessary to put this story in perspective, and I hope this will aid us when I say that there is a message for us in today’s reading.

First, let me say a bit defensively, that there are several streams in contemporary Christianity that I believe are not so faithful to the Bible as their followers might intend. The first is to raise the Bible itself to the level of an idol, and then not to go beyond the surface as we read it — which sounds, and is, inconsistent and contradictory. I’ll give as an example the incredible Hebrew Bible story of Jonah, which I believe is a parable about how we cannot escape from God when God wishes to use us, not a story about an actual event in which a fish swallows a man who does not want to be a prophet. The second stream is the trend not to read from the Bible in worship, but for a preacher to insert into a sermon a few verses that may — or may not — support what the preacher has to say; it can be difficult to tell, because such sermons are not expositions on a Scripture which has been read.

But then to the point of my defensiveness: Jesus was a Jew! While the spread of Christianity ultimately was greatest in the non-Jewish, the *Gentile*, parts of the Roman Empire, the first Christians were also Jews, and they saw, and thus have helped us to see, that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise — promises — of the Scriptures that we call the Old Testament, and also of some Jewish writings that did not make that canonical cut. And in that vein, all four versions of the Gospel, though in somewhat different ways, were what helped to tell Jews and others that

Jesus is that fulfillment of the Old Testament. "Testament," by the way, means "promise"; Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises God made through the Old Testament.

So, to be very blunt, without the Old Testament, the Gospel lesson for today seems puzzling; without the Old Testament, we cannot fully grasp Jesus.

To be honest, even with the Old Testament the *Transfiguration* story is a bit puzzling, but let me try at least to sing the praises of the writer of Mark as I make a few connections. For in this story, three disciples accompany Jesus up a mountain, just as three men accompanied Moses as he went up the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments. A mountain was also the place to which Elijah, a prophet of the 9th century before Jesus, fled, and was found by God. So Jesus goes up a mountain and is accompanied by three men and, lo and behold, he encounters two long dead "men," which clearly should have shocked the disciples, men whom we are supposed to know because of their prominence in the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah. Now, Moses' presence in the story is relatively easy to understand; if he is not the most important figure in Jewish history, he is second only to Abraham, and it is Moses through whom God delivered the Torah, the Law, to the Jews, and it is Moses who led the people out of slavery in Egypt and most of the way to the Promised Land. While unlike the writer of Matthew, Mark does not otherwise emphasize the Idea of Jesus as successor to Moses, I believe it is there in today's story. But Elijah? I love the Elijah stories, but why is Elijah present?

For reasons that escape me, our Lectionary editors do not include these verses that succeed what I read a few moments ago:

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. ¹⁰ So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean. ¹¹ Then they asked him, “Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” ¹² He said to them, “Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things. How then is it written about the Son of Man, that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt? ¹³ But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him.”

“But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him”?

Five weeks back, we read the story of the Baptism of Jesus, in which we encountered John the Baptizer and these words:

2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’”

That “quotation” is not all from Isaiah — the writer of Mark got it wrong; did he not know that the Bible is not supposed to contain errors? — it is a conflation of a passage from Isaiah 40, from which Nancy read last week, and a passage from the Old Testament minor prophet *Malachi*, which means, “messenger.” In *Malachi*, we also read these words:

Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the LORD.

(Malachi 4:5 [Tanakh JPS])

So why was Elijah part of the Transfiguration story? The writer of Mark has Jesus declaring to the three that John the Baptizer, who while we were away had been arrested and beheaded by Herod, was Elijah as forecast by Malachi! And for whom had Elijah-John prepared the way, but for him, Jesus! Elijah has come already! The time the preparation for which this Elijah was to come has arrived, the time for the Messiah; the Day of the Lord has come!

The Transfiguration story, in other words, is an interesting way in which the writer of Mark is again telling us that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of Man foretold in Daniel, but yet more than the Messiah, Jesus is the *Son of God!*

In the baptism story as we read it several weeks ago, with the Spirit descending like a dove, only Jesus heard the declaration, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” It was a secret from everyone else.

But now, three apostles have heard the declaration: Jesus is the Son of God.

OK, why *transfiguration*, or *metamorphosis*, a change in *form* or *appearance*, as expressed in the Greek? Well, one argument is that there is a strained parallel to a story about Moses’ putting a veil over his face to hide its brightness after he had talked with God; I alluded to that in the notes about today’s Epistle reading. I myself suspect the change in Jesus’ appearance may have been the way for the writer of Mark to distinguish Jesus as different — and not just in appearance — from Moses and Elijah, making clear to the three disciples (and to us) that Jesus is the Son of God and not simply, though simply seems not quite the right word, the promised Messiah.

And knowing that Jesus is the Son of God, is there any reason that even though their own appearance has not changed, James and John and Peter should not themselves be more than transfigured, more than *metamorphosed*, but changed inside by this knowledge, and ready, upon his resurrection, to proclaim it to the world?

And should not we also be changed by it! We have have no excuse not to be changed by knowledge of Jesus as the Son of God. We did not need to have that experience on the mountain, or so I hope, since most of us have received from parents or friends or from the Church the good news that Jesus not only was the Messiah, but that Jesus is the Son of God and that he has come because of God's love for us.

If we are down-in-the-dumps or in despair, discouraged, depressed, in grief, *whatever*, still, our lives are more than *metamorphosed* from what they would be if we did not know Jesus, and, if they have not yet been, than perhaps through praying and allowing moments of silence in which to perceive God's speaking to us, God himself will so teach us.

Even if the furrows and wrinkles in our brows might not disappear, somehow we can know that we are loved, that God sent the Son of God because God loves us. Furrows in the brow, yes, but even so, perhaps we are transfigured and radiant with the knowledge of the love of God, joyous in appearance from the peace of Christ, and surely *transformed*.

Botox cannot do that; only God can do that. God through Jesus Christ, better than Botox.

Amen.