

Outward and Visible, Inward and Spiritual

[Matthew 3:1-17](#)

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Our faith is always two things: outward and visible, but also inward and spiritual. This is what we say about the Sacraments of Holy Communion and Holy Baptism, that they are outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace.

Let's talk about baptism today. The story of Jesus' baptism in Matthew's Gospel comes right after last week's lesson about the "slaughter of the innocents" and the "flight to Egypt." After Egypt, Mary and Joseph returned with Jesus to Nazareth, when the reign of King Herod was over. We have nothing about Jesus growing up: no boyhood stories at all. We don't know if he played outside with the neighbor children. We don't even know that he learned to read. Chapter 2 ends, and by chapter 3, Jesus is a man, and we find him in Judea at the Jordan River where John is baptizing. This is quite a contrast to the first 2 chapters in Matthew, which deal with Herod, the King of the Jews, and the wise men who follow a star.

The narrative moves from Jerusalem, the city with the Temple and all the Temple leaders, to the wilderness. But the Pharisees and Sadducees from the Temple leadership are there. They have come down the hill to the river for some reason. Even they seem to be seeking a change in their lives. It may have been 27 years since Jesus was born—most say his ministry only lasted 1 year, possibly 3. According to the story, everyone was at the river. People seemed to want to turn their lives around. You see, John's message was to repent. You wouldn't walk a long way or go into the river and get all wet, especially with a wild man like John, unless you were taking this all pretty seriously. Jesus came all the way from Galilee, a walk that would have taken several days. Probably the Pharisees and Sadducees who came from Jerusalem didn't expect to be put down by John when he said, "You brood of vipers!" But maybe they needed to be broken of their high-falutin attitude and sense of pompous entitlement. They wouldn't have come if they hadn't believed there could be more to life.

And John baptized them with water—which is something tangible and visible—to represent the change each person could make in his or her life—which is something inward and spiritual. Repentance would mean something different for every person coming to the river. It could mean turning away from sin, or becoming a person less oriented to one's own needs and more toward helping others. Or maybe repentance means opening oneself to God in a new way. Like with a New Year's resolution, often you don't have the willpower to carry out a new resolution, unless you go public. Walking forward into the water was the public act, the outward and visible sign.

I wonder what the change was that Jesus wanted to make in his life. We believe that Jesus was without sin, so his repentance must have been a different kind of change. John didn't feel worthy to baptize Jesus. John said, "I need to be baptized by you!" But something was

going to change. After Jesus left John, he went into the wilderness and was tempted, and then when John was arrested, Jesus began his ministry in Galilee. He went public.

The writers of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all make Jesus' baptism the turning point and the beginning of Jesus telling the good news. Perhaps he made a decision at the river that day. Perhaps he felt God's call to turn from living for himself to living for others.

It was a public moment. Jesus had been predicted by John as one who would be more powerful than he, one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The signs would be even more evident than water. And the voice from heaven announced, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." The announcement was to all the people gathered. It was a public occasion.

Baptism is a public event. We do not generally baptize people privately or in their homes. When it is a child, we want the gathered community to promise to raise the child in the Church. And when it is an adult, we want the person to confess his or her own faith publicly.

Everything we do as Christians has both a private and a public dimension. I know I have demonstrated this before with the cross. The vertical line always reminds me of God's grace that comes down to us. We experience God's love and forgiveness internally. It's the peace that passes understanding, and the feeling of wholeness we get from prayer and meditation. And there is also the horizontal beam of the cross that extends out into the world. Like the arms of Christ reaching out, we the body of Christ participate in the work of love in the world. John Wesley spoke of "acts of piety"—prayer and worship—and "acts of mercy"—outreach missions work and advocacy for social change in the systems of our society. The inward and spiritual dimension of religion causes us to respond with outward and visible works. Personal faith in God is not enough. We must demonstrate our love for God by loving our neighbor.

Ministers have so many resources now at our fingertips. When I was in seminary, I remember when we students showed one of our professors how she could find any line of scripture in the Bible simply by typing it into a search engine. You can "google" anything today. I can't imagine having to look up every question I have in a library. We have so many reference tools online.

One great tool is called "the text this week," or as many call it, "textweek.com." I was digging into this site this week for ideas about my sermon today. It's a wonderful site with lectionary resources, sermon illustrations, film clips, an art index, new translations...and more. Well, I happened on a piece of writing by the woman who maintains this website, textweek.com. I had never realized before that one woman compiles this site every week of the year in three year cycles. Her name is Jenee Woodard, and she has an interesting story.

Woodard went to seminary in Kansas City. She's a United Methodist, but didn't take to pastoral ministry. She has always loved studying, but admits frankly she's not that good with people. She planned to pursue an academic career, and was applying to graduate

schools, but then she had her first child, Jaie. (Jaie is now in her late twenties.) Woodard calls her daughter "Einstein." Jaie is getting her PhD at Harvard in biophysics. Woodard's second child, Phil, she calls "Rain Man." Phil is severely autistic. Now in his mid-twenties, he lives with Jenee and her husband. When Phil was two, Jenee Woodard learned that her son had autism, and her life took a hard turn. She dropped her doctoral program and concentrated on helping her son and making a career around being home with him. She developed "the text this week," all by herself, sitting sometimes on the floor with her computer and Phil nearby. This website gets a million hits a month, 4 million in the month approaching Easter. Most of the hits are pastors, writing their sermons.

Peter Wallace, a nationally known pastor, said, "I love her story. She was faced with this situation [of a son with autism] and found a way to reinvent herself, to do what she enjoys doing, but in a way that reaches so many people."

Jenee's husband, Bob, said, "The challenge of raising Phil...open[ed] a door that would not have been there—the creation of Textweek. The influence [Jenee] has on others in the world of religious studies is so much greater than if she had become that traditional religious scholar [that she originally had expected to become]."

Jenee says of herself, "It is my ministry—or what I do with my life, as I explore what I think is my responsibility as a human being—to give more than I take, and to use my gifts for service to others, while giving myself a delightful new lens on texts and interpreters of texts. This is the heart of my own faith and of my task, as I see it, in the world" (<https://www.faithandleadership.com/woman-behind-textweekcom>). To give more that she takes—and to delight—those are her goals.

I have gone to this site hundreds of time. This time, after reading Jenee's story about her son Phil, I clicked on "make a donation." Woodard gets no money for her work, other than pastors donating a little now and then, and she has started to put ads on the site, but only related to ministry.

Here is a woman who is a person of inward faith and great interest in learning. But she also has developed an outward, visible dimension of who she is. She is contributing to thousands of churches around the country and English-speaking world, by informing their pastors of resources, new interpretations, and wonderful applications of faith to real life.

This woman put her son first in her life. She side-stepped her own aspirations in order to give Phil the best life he could expect. Now Phil works for the local school district, keeping their computer network functioning. He puts together computers and installs their operating systems. His parents appreciate his talents and understand his behavior. They have found a church where Phil is warmly accepted, and they are grateful.

Jenee Woodard made a change in her life. Perhaps she had to, when Phil was born. But she made the change willingly. Now she sees how her change in direction has benefited many, many people. God gave her a path that would express her belief that each child is a child of

God, deserving of love and teaching. And this path made tangible Jenee's own private faith. Now she shares it with millions of people seeking spiritual guidance every week.

The star of Bethlehem was an outward sign, written about in the Gospel of Matthew, of an inward, spiritual grace. God's love came down in the form of a baby, but that love was yet to be understood. The outward sign was the star that brought light to the world. It brought people of diverse language and ethnic backgrounds to the manger. It opened God's love to all who could see. That light shines on into our world today, as a sign that we are to put into practice the faith we hold in our hearts, to love even the unlovable, to care for the refugee and the homeless person, to be the outreaching arms of Christ in the world. May we receive the light of God's love and let it shine in our lives and in our communities.