

Title: I am a witness  
January 7, 2018; First Sunday After Epiphany  
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Here we are together for worship again. Some of us haven't seen each other since Third Advent and a lot has happened since then in the Christian story we celebrate. Perhaps you were here on Christmas Eve or perhaps, like my family, you gathered with extended family and read the story around the Christmas tree. The Christmas Eve reading I heard did not include the Magi or Wise Ones. Even though "We Three Kings" is often included in the Christmas carols and larger Christmas pageants, the Wise Ones are actually the headliners in the next liturgical season, the Season of Epiphany. In the liturgical calendar, just like Christmas is always December 25, Epiphany is always January 6<sup>th</sup>. So today is the First Sunday after Epiphany and the weeks that follow are part of the Season of Epiphany until Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent.

Now let's get back to the story. On Christmas Eve we saw Jesus born in a stable celebrated by angels and shepherds. At this point only Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth and some unnamed shepherds know who Jesus is. We will spend the next six Sundays discovering who Jesus is. What was all that Hallelujah singing last month really all about? We are the ones who benefit now by hearing the stories of

ancient “epiphanies.” Perhaps we will also be so blessed as to also have an epiphany – *a sudden perception of the essential nature of Jesus, an intuitive grasp of reality*<sup>1</sup> through these stories.

The Book of Matthew tells us the wise ones from the East were looking for the King of the Jews so that they might honor him. They had observed his star at its rising and came bearing gifts. The story doesn’t say that there were three sages, just three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. The greatest gift the wise ones gave Jesus and have given to us too was their decision not to go back to King Herod to tell him where the infant king was. King Herod was jealous and deceitful. We heard in the scripture reading that Herod told the travellers to come back to him so that he may also pay homage to the newborn king, but they were warned in a dream of his true intentions - *to maintain power and dispose of anyone who might stand in his way*. They wanted no part of it. The travellers returned home by another way.

Our theme for the Season of Epiphany is “Gifts for Another Way,” based on the KAIROS resource material with the same name. Given the choice to align with genocidal King Herod or to be in solidarity with that young child of peace, the Magi choose the child and go home *another way*. Bypassing Jerusalem not only

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<sup>1</sup> Defining phrases taken from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epiphany>

saves them from collusion with despot Herod, but, through a choice of solidarity, opens them up to the new possibilities that the way of Christ represents.

It's a decision to reject the way of destruction and death for the way of new life, to align with the humble over the powerful—a risky choice, but one of integrity.

As people of faith, we have been presented with that choice over and over again: to align with imperial rulers towards the ways of violence, of destruction of peoples and the planet, or to choose God's way, the accompaniment of the marginalized, the path towards peace. Our history reveals both times of collusion with empire and holy moments when we have been faithful to the ways of justice. As we keep making that choice, as we journey that way, we may encounter risk, hardship, and struggle, but we also experience gifts: gifts of experiences, and gifts of companionship, gifts of learning and insight, gifts of transformation.

Throughout the season we will lift up and celebrate various gifts along this other way. May they renew our commitment the path of solidarity.



It was Deacon Rennie Nahanee who brought together the ideas of baptism and witness for me this week. Before I get into the baptism part I want to ponder for a moment what it might mean for you and me to be a witness. I have a button that says “I am a witness”. The First Nations Child and Family Caring Society was

waiting for a tribunal decision in a long, drawn out case alleging negligence and inequity on the part of the government. As the court deliberated, the Caring Society gathered supporters. If the decision was in their favor the government would need to be pressed to comply. If the decision was not in their favor there would need to be an appeal for the sake of the children who are being taken from their homes in higher numbers now than at any point during the residential school system, an issue which would be vastly ameliorated by fair funding to community social services. In any case, the road to peace for the children and their families is to have the public not only know about the issues, but be prepared to speak out. Think of the children's time. Everyone witnessed the situation, but who were *the witnesses?*— the ones who spoke out. The tribunal decision sided with the Caring Society in favour of the Indigenous children. The “I am a witness” campaign continues as we await recommended changes in funding and in children's aid services across the country. “I am a Witness” is listed in “free ways to make a difference” on the Caring Society website. A simple campaign of lapel buttons and online signatures reminded me of the *gift* of being a witness. It has no monetary cost. A witness is a protector of truth, one who shares the truth as they know it and points the way on the path of peace. An act of witness is a

gift. To share the story you have seen or experienced or learned is a gift to those who do not know it.

Let's go back to the biblical narrative again. You may have noticed that I chose two gospel readings for our scripture today, two different stories. The Magi, their gifts and their choices, set the stage for the whole season. In some churches that would have been yesterday's story, for the actual day of Epiphany, January 6<sup>th</sup>, but it is too important to leave out. Now we jump ahead 30 years or so to the baptism of Jesus, right at the beginning of his public ministry. Notice the gift of witness in this story.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus was baptized, especially, why did he need to take part in what John was calling a baptism of repentance? At this point in the Scriptures, John is already named as "the Baptizer". He was "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins" (Mark 1: 4b-5). Now, while he was baptizing these throngs of people he had opportunity to be a witness for the Christ. "He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy

Spirit" (v 7-8). This is John's gift of witness. He is already gathering the supporters, speaking the truth that he knows and sharing it with all who will listen. His camel hair clothing was his button: I am a witness.

In Mark's gospel, unlike Matthew's, John performs the baptism without comment. The story here doesn't have him objecting that he is not worthy to baptize Jesus, it is just done. What all three of the synoptic gospels – Mark, Matthew and Luke – agree on is that the baptism is followed by the Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove and a voice from heaven proclaiming that Jesus is God's son and God is well pleased with him. This is a profound witness to the hundreds of people gathered at the Jordan River, gifted to us through three different voices with remarkable consistency. The baptism is an opportunity for both John and the Spirit to witness to who Jesus is, as much as it is an occasion of Jesus' solidarity with the people, with us.

Baptism has remained a key element of Christian faith throughout the centuries. While there are many variations in how it is performed, Christian baptism always includes water as a concrete symbol of cleansing and new life and the baptism is itself a testimony, a witness to something greater. Catholic Deacon Rennie Nahanee of the Squamish First Nation writes, "Baptism is the gift that keeps on giving by connecting family relatives and community together in our Christian

faith. This is the beginning of a new life, born again in the faith community where ...all of us are needed to help keep the new member of the kingdom of God on the right path.”<sup>2</sup>

Our Confession of Faith from Mennonite Church Canada states, “Baptism is a testimony to God's gift of the Holy Spirit and the continuing work of the Spirit in the lives of believers....The baptism of the Holy Spirit” says the Confession, does 5 things, it [counting on fingers] “enables believers to walk in newness of life, to live in community with Christ and the church, to offer Christ's healing and forgiveness to those in need, to witness boldly to the good news of Christ, and to hope in the sharing of Christ's future glory.”<sup>3</sup> End quote. I want to focus on the 4<sup>th</sup> phrase today: to witness boldly.

Jesus’ baptism witnessed to his identity and began his earthly ministry. Our own baptisms call us to walk in a newness of life, to witness boldly to the good news of Christ. How we do that has been the question of my life. What does it mean to witness to the good news of Christ? Some people choose to stand at Yonge and Dundas with a cardboard sign and a bull horn. That is not my calling. I was raised with the axiom that “actions speak louder than words” and “**do** unto others as

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<sup>2</sup> KAIROS. *Gifts for Another Way: Epiphany Year B Resource for Justice Seekers*, 2017, p 10.

<sup>3</sup> Mennonite Church Canada. Confession of Faith - Article 11: Baptism.  
<http://home.mennonitechurch.ca/cof/art.11#refs>

you would have them *do* unto you.” For me, to ‘witness boldly to the good news of Christ’ is to be a witness for truth and justice. I am a witness to the strength and resilience of our KAIROS partners and to the atrocities they endure at the hands of colonialism and corporate greed, in which we are complicit. Let me tell you a little about just a few of these partners, this time all from Guatemala.

A few years ago I heard about a film called Defensora. It “documents the historic and on-going land and community defense struggles of Mayan Q’eqchi communities in eastern Guatemala. [This film includes] their struggle for justice ... in Canadian courts against the nickel mining company Hudbay Minerals.”<sup>4</sup> I watched it alone in my living room and cried and cried. The story was so vividly told. I felt like I was right there beside them, seeing the “lives of defenders in the resistance who struggle to reclaim their ancestral lands, [seeing those who are seeking] justice in Canadian courts for [all the] human rights violations.”<sup>5</sup> I knew that what the Canadian owned mining companies were doing was not right. I struggled to comprehend how anyone could think that it was acceptable to force evictions by raping the women, smashing their belongings and finally torching their houses. There were shootings too, in this community, one dead and one

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<sup>4</sup> 6kidsProductions and Girl Edge Films, in partnership with Rights Action. *Defensora Press Release*. October 10, 2013. <http://www.defensorathefilm.com/2013/10/defensora-press-release.html>.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.defensorathefilm.com/2013/10/defensora-press-release.html>



paralyzed from the waist down. So strong is the desire for companies to make a good profit, for pension plans or mutual funds to see a “healthy return”, for individuals – you and I - to buy products at the “best possible price” that many a CEO or company executive will turn a blind eye to justice, just as long as someone ‘gets the job done,’ the job of acquiring the land desired for mining without any compensation to the people who have lived on it for thousands of years, all to maintain power and dispose of anyone who might stand in their way. Let us take another way.

Who will be a witness?

There was a Canadian lawyer in the film, Cory Wanless, who talked about a lawsuit. He says to the audience, “We were just providing them with an option. Something that they could do if they want ....We thought that this might be a way of empowering them” he says. “And I felt very good about that, about giving them the choice....[Angelica Choc , the widow of Adolfo Ich who had been shot and killed] said, ‘the past year has been a year of sadness, a year of mourning and that time is now finished and now is the time to fight. I want to do this.’” the lawyer continues. “It just blew me away. The strength. The strength of all of our clients. It is very humbling to work for them (25:41).

Why be a witness?

There is a famous quote attributed to an Aboriginal activist group, Queensland, 1970s. “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”<sup>6</sup> John knew his liberation was bound up with Jesus. He couldn’t help but witness to the truth he knew, even when it cost him his physical freedom or eventually his earthly life. Cory Wanless, the lawyer, knows that his liberation is bound up with the plaintiffs he serves. Where is our liberation?

What does it mean for me to be a witness? Seeing that film gave greater meaning and purpose to my work. Convicted of the truth and dreadfulness of just one situation, knowing there are dozens, maybe hundreds, more, I did my little part: research and communications work to support others at KAIROS who were leading the Open for Justice Campaign, which asks the Canadian government to always allow foreign plaintiffs to seek justice in Canadian courts. In 2014 someone on our team – who shall remain nameless in my rendition – came up with the brilliant idea that we should ask everyone to make little videos of themselves. Remember the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge that went viral in the summer of 2014? Dump a bucket of ice on your head and publically challenge a friend to do the same – all caught on video and posted to social media. Only at KAIROS the idea

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<sup>6</sup> [www.breakingthesilenceblog.com/](http://www.breakingthesilenceblog.com/)

was to somehow say “All I want for Christmas is...mining justice” and challenge others to do the same. They came up with a cute little promo video made by 20 year old film producers in elf costumes. It was very clever, but I’m afraid the idea of the “All I want for Christmas” video challenge never really caught on – in spite of the clever hipster elves it was missing the ice bucket hilarity. My boss did his video incognito – we only knew it was his because of the sports motif and glimpses of his kids in the background. And mine, well, I sat in front of our Christmas tree with my phone and did about 14 takes. It didn’t help. I am no better suited for video production than for standing on a soap box on the street corner, but I posted it anyway with a challenge to a few friends. I looked for it online last night and thankfully couldn’t find it...hopefully you can’t either. My clever colleague who came up with the idea bestowed my video with tongue-in-cheek honorable mention for its only redeeming quality: the most earnest.

There are many ways to be a witness: words, pictures, giving books, suggesting films, thoughts shared with family and friends. To be a witness isn’t only for those who take on a multi-national corporation with a personal lawsuit. It can also be signing the petition or wearing the button or writing the letter on behalf of those who take on the lawsuits or put forward the bills in parliament. We are called to witness to Jesus. To witness to Jesus is to witness to truth and love. We witness to

injustice for the sake of truth and love. I am a witness to the strength and resilience of our partners and to the atrocities they endure at the hands of colonialism in which we are complicit.

At the time when I first watched Defensora I didn't remember that it was in Guatemala. The truth is that Canadian mining companies are doing the same sort of thing all over Central America and the name of the community had not stuck in my memory. But I did remember the name of the woman who was the voice for the local resistance, Angelica Choc. Her claim, which I have every reason to believe, is that her husband was killed at the hands of the head of the security forces from a Canadian owned mine. Along with Angelica, her husband Adolfo Ich was a community leader in defence of their ancestral lands. Now some of you know I went to Guatemala this summer, assisting with a youth exchange. On our first day I was surprised then to have our young translator introduced as Angelica Choc's son, Jose.

Jose was at first only going to stay with us for a couple of days when the translations needs were heaviest, but ended up staying the week. He fit well with our little group of activists – mostly young people, Indigenous and non-Indigenous from Canada and Guatemala. He is a thoughtful, friendly, helpful person. One night he opened up and told us about the day his father was killed. His dad had

told him not to come out that day, it might be dangerous. But Jose was 15 and liked to be where the action was. He followed his father, at a distance. Thus he watched while his father was shot and killed. That is a heavy load for any son to carry, let alone a 15 year old. Months later when I asked Jose to write a short paragraph for the Gifts for Another Way worship resource, this is what he wrote. “The loneliness I felt after my father died has led me to work for the good of my community and encourage them to seek justice for all the damage that has been done to them....Colonial history is being repeated; only now it is foreign companies AND the government of Guatemala, using the same tactics to take the land from the indigenous people. And that why I, as a young person, unconditionally support my people in Guatemala.”<sup>7</sup>

Jose wrote these words from a waiting room in an office tower on King Street, yes, in Toronto.

The Mayan Q’eqchi’ people depicted in Defensora have launched 3 lawsuits against Hudbay Minerals: one for the shooting death of Adolfo Ich, Jose’s father, one for a shooting paralysation of German Chub and a third for the gang-rape of 11 women from the remote community of Lote Ocho. It was the women from Lote Ocho who were in Toronto this past November for questioning. Most of the

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<sup>7</sup> KAIROS, Gifts for Another Way, p11.

women from Lote Ocho have never left Guatemala before, let alone travelled on a plane. They are all unilingual Q'eqchi' speakers. Jose, who is from a neighbouring community and has studied in the United States is fluent in Q'eqchi', Spanish and English. He makes a great accompanier and translator. My colleague and I were looking for an opportunity to reconnect with Jose when he was in Toronto and were fortunate enough to have dinner with 5 of the women who are bringing the lawsuits, including Jose's mother Angelica. I would echo what the lawyer said in the documentary, it is humbling to be in their presence and witness their strength. To know that they had been under grueling examination all day long and showed signs of fatigue, yet they smiled and joked with their companions, showing clear signs of the solidarity between them, and gracious appreciation for our small offers of hospitality.

This is the first time in Canadian history that a case which occurred outside Canada will be tried in a Canadian court. This is what it means for Canada to be "Open for Justice." The plaintiffs in these cases have clearly, sacrificially, offered themselves as witnesses. The lawyers report that the women are not focused on the end result of the lawsuits. It is the struggle that is important. They want to be heard. Rosa, Angelica's sister, tells us in Defensora that four of them have gone knocking on doors in their community looking for support, not financial

support, but support in their quest for justice. Their small team she says have “cried, we have laughed, and we have yelled at the government of Guatemala so that we might be heard, so that our rights might be validated. We are asking for justice and if in Guatemala we are not heard we will come to Canada looking for justice. Hopefully Canadians will validate our rights, even though in Guatemala they are abused,”<sup>8</sup> Rosa says.

Jose too offers himself in the service of truth-telling in the simple and valuable tasks of guiding a group of rural women through an international airport, translating through customs, and helping them on and off an escalator – such strange things these moving stairs!

Having not done so well on making a video challenge go viral, those of us associated with KAIROS and other activist organizations still sincerely ask you to consider how *you can be a witness*. Perhaps this story from Guatemala has grabbed your attention or perhaps it reminds you of something else you know is going on in your workplace, in our city, or somewhere in the world. Where are you called to be a witness, to take a bold stand and let people know – it’s not okay. This is travelling another way, the non-imperial way. It’s a decision to reject the way of destruction and death for the way of new life, to align with the humble

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<sup>8</sup> Defensora, 17:52 and forward.

over the powerful—a risky choice, but one of integrity. It is not one choice for all time, but a daily choice. Take a stance. Wear the label with confidence: I am a witness.