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“Witness”

**A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth
John 1: 1-14**

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I keep seeing these Nike t-shirts everywhere that have one word
emblazoned across the front: “Witness”.

What’s that all about, I wondered?

And so I asked, and found that it alludes to

an NBA basketball game played on May 31, 2007 in which
Cleveland Cavaliers’ demi-god, LeBron James, scored

48 points to win in overtime over the Detroit Pistons.

“Witness” is a testimony to LeBron James’ nearly-perfect game
and to his out-of-this-world athletic prowess.

In the beginning was the Word.

Do we know what John’s Gospel means by that?

Someone has dared to imagine what John’s Gospel DOESN’T mean.

Someone has dared to imagine that the Word is not a Word of order,

or even a Word of present order, because that would serve to keep
some people on the margins, where they already are.

That would dare to say,

that children be seen and not heard;

that women remain silent in churches;

that African Americans stay relegated to the balconies;
that immigrants be assigned menial jobs only;
that older adults take early retirement;
that the poor stand at the back of every line.
that people of differing sexualities be denied civil rights.

That someone, theologian Rebecca Chopp, also has dared to imagine
that what John's Gospel might mean in his prologue,
is the Word as ***perfectly open sign***.

"It is a Word that creates and sustains all other words," she says.

"It is a Word that opens up many voices,

any of which can push and challenge and transform the present order."

(Theologian Rebecca Chopp, as quoted by Anna Carter Florence in *Preaching as Testimony*, p. 95)

It is a Word of power. It is a Word of transformation.

It is a mystery. It is of God.

In the beginning was *perfectly open sign*, Ms. Chopp imagines.

And the *perfectly open sign* was with God,
and the *perfectly open sign* was God.

The *perfectly open sign* is for the realignment of all relationships.

It is for the canceling of debts and the making new of all things.

It is for freedom. It is for jubilee.

There came a man who was sent from God, his name was John.

He came, as a witness, to testify to the brilliant bright Word,

to the radiantly pure-light Word that keeps cropping up
in all closed dark places of human hierarchy.

He came to testify, to bear witness, to point, to direct, and to jab his finger

at God's *perfectly open sign*.

"There it is. There is the One who comes after me, yet who came before me,"

he said.

Yet every time John tried to capture the Word with words, in order to proclaim it,
it eluded his description, because it was perfectly open and free.

Every time he tried to describe it with imagery, imagine it with metaphor,
depict it with poetry, emote it with melody, embody it with dance,
as we are doing today,

it slipped his grip, because it was perfectly open and free.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *perfectly open sign*,
and the Word resisted being owned and being controlled,
even by John, God's messenger,
because God had set it loose

in the world that all, even those on the margins,
might have life, and have life fully and abundantly.

Yet God sends his messengers as witnesses, not to play a perfect game,
which no one can do, not even LeBron James;

but to convey collectively our experience of the coming Luminous One,
who is perfectly open to being experienced by every single person,
but who cannot be observed

without drawing every single one of us
into life-changing relationship with the Word.

And once we have experienced God's perfectly open sign,
we are never the same again,

because we also start becoming perfectly open.

Similarly, falling in love doesn't leave any of us the same person
with a different external relationship; it always changes who we are!

And witness to this Word can not be expressed by a t-shirt
or confined to a t-shirt,

because once you and I have experienced the Word made flesh,
Jesus Christ,

we become part of the One who is the Word,
and we become changed by our relationship with the Word.
And then our whole lives become witness to the Word,
embodiment of the word,
and not just words from our lips or words on our t-shirts.
And then the Word as *perfectly open sign*
requires that our whole community serve as witness,
beginning first among those most powerless,
where perfect openness to God is most prevalent.
And so we witness as we sit down and listen first
to the widower grieving the recent loss of his beloved wife;
to the woman slowly losing her eyesight;
to the artist handicapped by a brain disorder;
to the parents awaiting a heart transplant for their baby;
to the man homebound by a physical impairment;
to the partners and their children looking for a welcoming community;
to the addict struggling to remain clean;
to the dementia patient trying to remember where she is;
to the unwed mother expecting a baby.
We listen and hear how they have met, encountered, and experienced
the unexpected, out-of-this-world, light-bright grace and love of God,
and how the Word has changed who they are,
and is now changing who we are,
working and weaving all things and all people together for the good.

“Witness” on a t-shirt is for those who have seen a good basketball game.
Witness with our whole lives is for people living **in complete awe**,
who have been brought out of the darkness of human contrivance,
into the hopeful light of God's *perfectly open sign*, Jesus Christ,
the Word that makes all things new and possible. Amen.