

# A Cloud of Witnesses

BY JAMES E. ROGHAIR

The Epistle to the Hebrews gives us our theme: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith... (12:12a).”

So, who are they – the cloud of witnesses? Those people of faith who encourage us? It takes the entire 11th chapter of Hebrews to name them and to document their faith. They are men and women – named and unnamed – ordinary and extraordinary. But they all lived by faith and before the Advent of Jesus, trusting God’s promises and living in hope. The argument goes: if they could endure in faith, never seeing the evidence we have in Jesus Christ, can we do less? We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses!

I have been privileged to live and minister in a wide variety of settings. In each I have experienced a continuing manifestation of that cloud of witnesses – people of deep faith – in our own time. Most memorable was the eight years I spent among the Iñupiaq\* (Eskimo) of Arctic Alaska. There I glimpsed ordinary people, living in an extraordinary setting, doing their best to be faithful. They are a part of the great cloud of witnesses.

Living there I became more aware of the gifts of God. More aware of the way human beings share God’s gifts. My faith was sharpened. Travel with me into the presence of the Iñupiaq Christians. As they always do, they say, “Welcome to Barrow!”

## Generosity

Perhaps you will meet Nashanik. He is old, perhaps, beyond his years. On a summer day each year, I remember seeing him trudging across the dusty gravel street of Barrow, Alaska, a younger person helping him with several bags of groceries from the stuaqpak (literally big store in the local language). An Iñupiaq elder – a hunter – he was responding to his church’s request for help with the vacation Bible school. Every year he brought food, lots of it, to Utqia vik Presbyterian Church. It was a token of love for Christ and the church.

He was always a food provider. But even in a land of plenty, hunters sometimes experience hard times, and in his early days he had known starvation. To have food was wealth. To have a store was a luxury. To have food to share was a blessing. So share he must.

He grew up in a nomadic hunting and gathering culture, but his last days would be in a permanent village with cable television and modern plumbing. He has seen unbelievable changes in his

time. Then they survived by sharing – giving and receiving as needed. Now necessities are bought at the store with money. He has traveled through time – from the Stone Age to the computer age. And he has traveled with faith and silent dignity. When asked if he liked the old days better, he remembers some good times, but he says, “I don’t want to be hungry again.” He is thankful.

His people always understood food to be a very precious gift. They were thankful to the animals. Early Eskimo spirituality revolved around food, and an early concept of God visualized a Great Meat Dish.

The missionaries taught them that the gifts come from Atanik (God). But ancient native traditions had already taught them to share. Thankfulness and sharing are hallmarks of the Iñupiaq community. Those who remember the old ways are always thankful and respectful of the whales for giving themselves to the community. Now the community offers prayers to God before and after the hunt.

Nashanik is an ordained Presbyterian elder, always ready to pray when asked. He never misses worship. His life is proof that a good character can result from times of suffering. Marked by gratitude and generosity, Nashanik is one of the great cloud of witnesses.

## Thanksgiving

Martha, is another elder, a great-grandmother, who teaches the Sunday school children to thank God for “this cold land in which we live.” The cold waters of the ocean provide the abundance of food that her people have always cherished. The cold coastal plains have the abundant game they have always hunted. So she teaches the children thankfulness.

A tourist may come to Barrow in the summer and, feeling chilly, buy a baseball cap inscribed Barrow, Alaska: It isn’t the end of the world, but you can see it from here. She is thankful to get out, on the next plane! Tourists see a remote and desolate spot with quaint people. They stay at the Top of the World Hotel, feeling they are at the end of the earth. But for the Iñupiaq this spot is not the end, but the beginning.

The cold land and sea that makes Martha thankful, nurtures them and produces an abundance of good food. This place at the edge of the ocean is where everything begins – it is a center of Iñupiaq life and culture – a place for thanksgiving surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

## Kate

Now travel with me 75 miles south to the tiny village of Atqasuk. The plane circles the village of less than 50 houses, you land on gravel runway. Summer or winter, you are far from the rest of the world. There is no hotel, no café in this village. The store and post office are tiny. But the people will welcome you.

Most likely you will go to Kate's home. You will be fed sumptuously on roast caribou, frozen fish or maybe goose soup. She will make biscuits. She is an easy-going hostess. No fine china here. But in her home a guest is always welcome. You might find a frozen seal thawing on her kitchen floor awaiting butchering. Whatever she serves, Kate offers a blessing, praying in her Iñupiaq language.

When the village needs something, they always count her as one of the leaders. She is an Elder in the tiny Atqasuk Chapel, and because there is seldom a minister in the village, she takes her turn to lead services, Sunday mornings and Sunday evenings.

If someone is ill, she makes food, she visits and prays. If someone dies, she ritually takes the news to other family members. If funds are needed for someone in the hospital, she is the first to make a cake for the fund-raiser.

One year the children wouldn't come to practice their Christmas pageant. They wouldn't learn their parts. The organizer got so frustrated she was going to quit. But Kate came just in time. She told each one how wonderful they were. And before long the whole thing came together.

In her cold village she is a woman of great warmth and hospitality. She is one of the cloud of witnesses living her faith in Jesus Christ daily and making her village a place of hope.

## On Being Part of the Cloud

Being the pastor of Iñupiaq Presbyterian churches, I came away with an appreciation of the place and its people. They taught me much about community, faith and sharing. And although they did not use the word, they taught me much about Christian stewardship.

Such a cloud of witnesses surrounded me that my own faith was lifted. From Nashanik I learned lessons of sharing but not only from him. The deeply held and culturally significant ways of looking at food and all blessings of this world witness to that faith. God gives everything so that we can share.

From Martha I learned the deep sense of thankfulness and reverence for the earth especially their cold land and sea. This attitude is typical of Native spirituality and is at least in word well-attuned to the Judeo-Christian heritage. But practically, this attitude is very distant from daily lives and faith practices of urban Christians. I thank God for this special witness of faith.

From Kate I learned the simplicity and practicality of faithful living – the hospitality of faithfulness. How can one vulnerable person live and lead faithfully in so many different ways? Only by concentrating wholly on that which lies immediately at hand. Kate is not a superwoman only one who has her faithful priorities in order. Then in her ordinary daily life lives deeply a witness of faith – one of the cloud of witnesses.

Perhaps you, too, are called to be one of the cloud of witnesses: a faithful person sharing in hospitality and thanksgiving, the blessings of the earth with all who come your way. You are not asked to be extraordinary, but simply one who goes about the daily rounds of life sharing the witness of your faith. Amen.

*\*Iñupiaq is a singular noun, ñupiak the dual and ñupiat the plural. The accepted designation is Iñupiat for the people and Iñupiaq for the language and culture.*

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