

Where We Are *Changed*

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The Wider Quaker Fellowship

La Asociación de amigos de los Amigos

INTRODUCTION

This message was presented on April 19, 2012 as the Section of the Americas address for the morning plenary worship during the Sixth World Conference of Friends held at Kabarak University in Nakuru, Kenya.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Noah Baker Merrill seeks to be faithful in the living Quaker tradition of gospel ministry — the practical spiritual work of encouraging faithfulness and awakening hearts. He is a member of Putney Friends Meeting (VT), which has released him for service encouraging the future of Friends. Noah is an associate with Good News Associates and a founding board member of Quaker Voluntary Service. In 2009, Utne Reader magazine recognized him as one of “50 Visionaries Who Are Changing Your World.” Beginning in 2013, Noah will serve as Secretary of New England Yearly Meeting.

In 1696, in the second generation of the Religious Society of Friends in England, a young woman named Anne Wilson rose in the power of the Spirit in meeting for worship. Amidst the Friends present, she pointed directly at a young man whom she had never met.

And this is what she said:

“A typical Quaker, thou comest to meeting as thou went from it the last time, and goes from it as thou came to it, but art no better for thy coming. What wilt thou do in the end?”

Until that point, most of the young man’s time attending meeting for worship had been spent finding new ways to sleep. But now his heart was broken open.

Samuel Bownas left meeting for worship that day in tender tears, and his life began to change. He became one of the most active travelers in ministry among the Friends of his time. His lifetime of faithful service would anoint and inspire generations of Quaker ministers before his death, and his foundational book, “A Description of the Qualifications Necessary to a Gospel Minister”, would help encourage, guide, and instruct Friends for hundreds of years, connecting us in a living stream from that meeting for worship...to this one.

Something happened in that meeting for worship — something vital. Something that mattered. Anne Wilson’s ministry to Samuel Bownas opened a new channel in young Samuel’s heart, and the Holy Spirit flowed in. Through an encounter with the challenge of the living Word among us, Samuel Bownas’ life began to be changed. And through that encounter, our life as the People of God called Friends was transformed.

Is there an Anne Wilson with us this morning? Is there a Samuel Bownas here?

Moments like the one in this story are the heartbeat of the Body we are together – each one brings fresh nourishment that we deeply need. Without this rhythm of faithfulness helping the Spirit to work in one heart, and another, and another, our corporate life would wither.

God breaks into our lives with a challenging message. The faithfulness of the messenger helps free us to grow into Love’s invitation for our lives. Seeing clearly how we are not yet who God created us to be, we are broken open. The vulnerability we feel with this opening becomes the channel for new life. And we come more fully Alive to the Kingdom of God.

Now I want to share another story about a moment like this. This one is a little different, and a little more complex. Let’s listen together for the same heartbeat beneath the words.

And so the prophet Elijah falls to his knees under a tree in the desert. “It’s enough, Lord. Please, let it end here. Take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.”

But there’s no answer. And he falls asleep under the solitary tree, there at the edge of the Wilderness of Sinai, in the desert wasteland where there is no food or water, but so much salt and light. And as he dreams, he remembers how he came to this place.

When the Word of the Lord first called him to be a prophet, the work was clear. The People had placed their faith in power-hungry rulers who had no more wisdom than the empty idols they served. To a people held captive to a hollow way of living, the Giver of Life sent an invitation. Into this desolation, a message was given that would re-open the door to relationship with what is most deeply Real.

The prophet Elijah began calling the people back to God, to recognize the face of the living one at the heart of Creation. Living water began to flow in powerful ways.

The sick were healed. Women unable to conceive children

bore sons and daughters. Those left for dead were revived. And though controversy, persecution, and resistance surrounded the prophet’s work, conflict made clear the choice that the People had to make — a choice between spiritual Life and Death — which meant life and death for the world.

There was a great gathering. Elijah called the People to draw closer to one another. If you’re willing, I invite you to rise, and take the hands of the Friends next to you. Elijah rose in the Spirit and prayed.

The gathered people felt living water flowing around them. They were opened to the Truth Who holds us all, the true Liberation and Love always available to each of us. They stood together in the power of an endless Life. Their hearts knew that God is Real.

Are you still with me?

Then Elijah outran his Guide. After helping the People see clearly the difference between what was Alive and what was not, he didn’t trust the Spirit to work. God had turned a corner, but the prophet kept running in another direction. Friends, what does it take in our lives, when we’re running fast toward what seems like so much good work, for us to remember to stop and wait, to stay deeply connected to our Guide? Where have we gone beyond what God asks of us, and continued in our own striving and pride?

Elijah ordered the people to take the false leaders captive, to bind them, and to murder them.

Far from that faithful moment when he and the People had felt the Living Stream flowing through them, when the rulers learned what Elijah had done, they swore to kill him. Now he was on the run, alone. He has isolated himself. Where, Friends, have we felt this?

At the edge of the wilderness, he came to what seemed the end of his life, under a twisted little tree surrounded by the

desert. And there, he fell asleep.

Suddenly an angel touches him and says, “Get up and eat.” He looks, and there at his head is a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He eats and drinks, and lies down again. The angel of the LORD comes a second time, touches him, and says, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” He gets up and eats, and then he goes in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights into the heart of the wilderness.

The angel sends him on a journey back to the Beginning, back to the place where the People of Israel became a people. Elijah travels to Mount Sinai, to the place where God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses. Elijah takes refuge in a cave on the mountainside, and night falls.

And in the desperate sleepless night, the Word of the Lord, the Inward Guide comes to him with a challenge: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

And Elijah answers, “I have been zealous for the LORD.”

Friends, don’t we know his condition? We’ve been working so hard; we’ve done so much! But we’re not called to be “zealous”, to work hard for God. We’re called to be faithful to just who God created us to be.

— “I have been zealous for the LORD.”

And then the Word comes again, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.”

Now there is a great wind that is breaking the rocks in pieces and shattering mountains before the LORD. But the LORD is not in the whirlwind. And after the wind there is an earthquake that shakes the foundations of the world. But the LORD is not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, there is a fire that seems it will consume everything in its burning. But the LORD is not in the fire. And after the fire is the sound of sheer silence.

In that stillness, Elijah, wrapping his cloak over his eyes, exposed and vulnerable, goes to the mouth of the cave.

Then there comes a still, small Voice: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

“I’ve been zealous for the LORD.”

— “Go home, Elijah. Return to the work I have for you.”

Elijah begins the long journey home. Something has happened. Something vital. Something that matters.

As he returns from the Wilderness, even though so much on the outside seems the same, Elijah has changed. Children can tell he’s been in the Wilderness. Others see his sunburned skin shining with the holy saltiness of the desert.

The message he’s been given to carry — calling the People home to the God who is most deeply Real and Alive — remains the same. But the whole way he carries the message has been transformed.

All this time, Elijah has believed he is working alone. But now, moving with a changed heart, Elijah recognizes that scattered among the wider people — seemingly everywhere he turns — are those who’ve also heard the call to the Living God.

On his way home, Elijah calls Elisha, who becomes his companion in ministry and his successor as a prophet. Elijah anoints the next generation. Together they set in motion a movement of Spirit-led prophets, some of whom practice very differently, some of whom he will never meet. Faithfulness and openness to new ways brings generations into the living prophetic stream, a stream that sustains the People no matter how far from home they find themselves, no matter how scattered they become, no matter how much they suffer.

Elijah’s story is the story of a moment. Like Samuel, like Anne. God breaks in with a challenge for the prophet to see his spiritual condition more clearly. Seeing opens the prophet’s heart to be changed and made new. And through the change in the prophet’s heart, all of us who choose to live in this same Living Stream are also changed.

As in the story of Anne & Samuel, in the wilderness Elijah is shown clearly how far he is from who God invites him to be. Seeing our spiritual condition clearly can be deeply painful. It can leave us angry, confused, despairing of hope. But this is what the Light does in moments like these. In describing the liberating work of the eternal Light she knew, our movement's midwife Margaret Fell used these words: "It will rip you up, and lay you open..."

Maybe we can understand Samuel Bownas' tears, Elijah's crying out in the desert. Do we really want to invite this Light to work in us? Do we truly choose to become the Children of this Light? It is through being helped to see with eyes unclouded, through our hearts breaking open, that transformation happens.

In my life, I have been zealous for the LORD. I have outrun my Guide. I have isolated myself, thinking I was working alone. I have seen how far I am from who God invites me to be. My heart has been broken open. At my most tender and vulnerable, I have felt the Whisper Who waits below the whirlwind, on the other side of the earthquake, Who is not consumed by the fire. And I know from experience that we can be changed.

Can you recognize yourself in these stories?

Are you Anne Wilson, invited to liberate the Spirit in another through your own faithfulness? Are you Samuel Bownas, your heart waiting to be awakened, broken open, changed to free the gifts we deeply need? Are you Elijah, being zealous for the Lord through so much work, called back to simply being a faithful child of God, and recognizing you are not alone?

How do these stories speak to our condition as Friends here, today?

What if the Prophet in Elijah's story wasn't a *person*? What if, instead, the Prophet was a *People*? What if, instead of this life-giving Word coming to an individual, the animating message came to a great People to be gathered? Because the People of

God called Friends has always been invited to be a prophetic People, to allow not just the words that one or two of us speak but the lives that all of us live to be a Sign of God in the world.

From the beginning, it was the witness of changed and liberated lives that shook the foundations of the established social, economic, and religious order of England. The Religious Society of Friends — the Friends Church — is about nothing if it's not about transformation. Helping each other open to the Living Christ among us, allowing ourselves to be searched by the Light at work within us, humbling ourselves to be taught by the Inward Teacher, trusting that surrendering to the Refiner's Fire, we can be given new hearts. And it is and always has been through these new hearts that we are made channels for the Motion of Universal Love.

In the beginning of our movement, in a time crying out for hope, Friends' faithfulness offered an invitation for the world to turn back to what was most deeply Real and Alive, to be set free from the false idols of violence, ignorance and empty religion. Living water poured in. There were great meetings, and many were convinced. The prison cells of England became nurseries for a prophetic People. There were signs and healings, and those left for dead were not just revived, but were welcomed to a new society where all could be sons and daughters of God, where Christ Jesus has come to teach his People himself. And even though controversy, persecution, and resistance surrounded their work, Friends lived the truth of the Resurrection, the triumph of Love over Death. And a beautiful new part of the oldest and greatest Story of Love began to be told.

I do believe that the living Spirit has always been at work among Friends. The faithfulness of many who came before us kept the fires burning and brought us here. The transformed lives of our spiritual ancestors remain lighthouses for us. And they are a cloud of witnesses hovering around us here.

But especially in light of those transformed lives, we need to be honest that like Elijah, our prophetic People outran our Guide. Perhaps because we had felt the intoxicating power of being God's instruments of Liberation and Love, we thought we didn't need to keep listening. Maybe we thought if we were only zealous enough, we could do it on our own.

As in the story of Elijah, the work of the Spirit turned a corner, but we kept going in the directions we chose. Through pride, rancor, and schism, the unity of our corporate life was torn apart. We became a shell and a shadow of who God invites us to be. We forgot that it was the Pharisees, and not Jesus, who taught that purity was more important than living faithfully in Love.

Then we grew more zealous. We replaced reliance on the Holy Spirit with hollow gods of rigid doctrine or intellectual notions. But the still, small voice of the Living Christ is not found in either of these.

The scars of the separations among us are deep and lasting. In our confusion, we have murdered the Life we were invited to live in together. Our spiritual ancestors did this, and in places we repeat their sins today. Do we know one of these places? Very little stirs us up or holds our attention longer than our internal conflicts. The discordant, shattered body of Friends does not bear witness that we know *the peace the world cannot give*. What we do unto the least of these our brethren, we do unto the One whose Friends our ancestors call us to be.

While we challenge other false gods – powers of violence, greed, and prejudice — we've been taken captive by our own idols. We've begun worshipping our wounds, our dysfunctions, our Quaker process and styles of worship as if they were what define us. A huge portion of our God-given energy is wasted by focusing on where the Life is *not*, distracting us from living where the Life *is*.

In places, we have embraced an unspoken article of faith that *because we call ourselves Quakers* we have innate wisdom or power to heal, to save, to bring peace and justice in this wounded world. For a long time now, instead of allowing the Spirit to make us instruments of radical Love today, we have been living on the reputation of some in our past. With vital exceptions, the deep tradition of Friends' Spirit-led service seems to a rising generation like another museum exhibit about who the Quakers *were*.

So while we can feel the Spirit has not been taken fully from us, and while there are reasons for hope, in my travels in the ministry I've met many among us – in North America and beyond – who feel like Elijah: alone, fleeing to the edge of all we know, wondering whether we might soon reach the end of the Story of the prophetic People called Friends.

Brokenness is not the end of God's Story – and it's not the end of ours. But it is our moment to fall to our knees under that solitary tree in the desert, to meet with the angel, and to be given the bread and water we need to survive the journey into the Wilderness.

Are we willing to come into the Presence with all of our vulnerability and brokenness? How can we invite one another to the mountain where we are changed?

This week, may we find in the stories of Ann, Samuel and Elijah – in the testimony of Margaret, in the hospitality of the angel in the desert – a way to imagine our time together. This is our meetinghouse; this is our prison cell; this is our cave on the mountainside. May we let their stories read us, and may we be taught.

In our time together, there will be a lot of wind. May we each be given the patience we need to wait below it, and to know that the LORD is not in the whirlwind.

There may be earthquakes that seem to shake the

foundations of our world – or of our deeply held beliefs. May we feel grounded in the pervasive power of prayer in which Friends worldwide are holding us, and may we know that the LORD is not in the earthquakes.

May there be fire — the fire of the Holy Spirit poured out among us. May the fire consume all that is not true and needed in what we hear and say and do. May we remember that the LORD is not in the fire, and may we trust that what is of the LORD in us will not be consumed, though the fires rage.

When all of these have passed, and the barely audible whisper of the Presence comes to us — whether in silent waiting worship, in a song of praise, in the queue at mealtime, in the work of a thread group, in a moment of pastoral care, in a quiet walk in the sunlight, or in our dreams at night — may we hear the challenge:

“What are you doing here?”

I know some of us have simply come to learn. Some to share gifts given through us. Some to celebrate 350 years – and more – of God’s faithfulness in the Religious Society of Friends, to share the joy of being a Friend and follower of Jesus Christ. Some with the hope that Friends worldwide will be united to help humanity survive the effects of catastrophic climate change and build new ways of living that will sustain us and Creation. Some to witness to what the Teacher has taught us about the length and breadth and depth of God’s Love. Some have come yearning for rebirth, for reclaiming the full message of Friends for our time. Some, afraid of what may happen here. Some to bring back news. Some to watch and pray.

When we go out from here, may we hear: *“A typical Quaker... What wilt thou do in the end?”*

And may this challenge open us to see with eyes unclouded who God still calls us to be. Of course real change rarely comes all at once. Our tradition tells us that new growth begun

in powerful moments like this conference needs tending with patience and prayer for the transformation to endure. Faithfulness isn’t a one-time sprint, it’s a long distance run. But may this be a new beginning.

We will seem very much the same on the outside as we return home. The sufferings and responsibilities; the loved ones and meetings we’ll return to, our appointments and employment will be largely unchanged.

I’ll go home to the northeastern United States, to the forested mountains and valleys that surround my monthly meeting, where the rivers flow fast and free. Last year, a great storm caused flooding worse than we’ve seen in a hundred years. Now the rivers have changed. The riverbeds are different — the heavy stones have been rolled away, the sand and soil reshaped. What lies beneath the surface has been transformed. And so the surface — the part that everyone sees — has changed as well. Like the rivers of my home, if we are inwardly changed in our time together, the nature of our witness, the testimony of our outward lives, will be different, and all we meet will know it, too.

If we are to serve the world’s need, the channels we are must be clear. If we are to carry living water, the channels we are must be clean. There are many heavy stones in us still to be rolled aside, much debris to be washed away, and many paths in us to be made straight. May we surrender to the Flood.

Like Ann, Samuel, and Margaret, like Elijah, sent home to the work God has for them, may we bring our transformed and transforming hearts home to our monthly meetings and churches. They live close to the ground, where new Life begins. While I know God has called many of us here to vital ministry in the wider world, it is at home – the place where our roots run deepest and we are most deeply known – where the witness of our changed and changing lives is most clearly felt. Whatever happens this week, whatever we say or do together here, it will

be the living water we bring home that makes a difference.
When we water the roots, we nourish the whole tree.

If ever the world needed the authentic, life-giving challenge that animated our spiritual ancestors, it needs it now. If ever people needed prophets to call us home to the humble, world-transforming power of the Love Who casts out Fear, and to this Love's availability and liberating grace in every heart, we need it today.

But this Love can't just be told about in stories. This Love needs to be lived in lives. There is no other Religious Society of Friends, no other Friends Church in which we can live the message for which this prophetic People is still being gathered. The work is for each of us, for all of us, together. And we have no time but this present time in which to be faithful.

Q U E R I E S

Following are some queries about the text, which you may wish to use for reflection or study, individually or with others.

1. Reflect on a time when your being faithful helped someone else to be faithful, or when someone else helped free you to serve more fully.
 2. Have you experienced a time that your heart has been opened to Divine Love — “the heavy stones have been rolled aside, the sand and soil reshaped...” — to help you to serve more clearly or fully?
 3. Can you identify a time when you, like Elijah, “outran your guide,” going beyond what God asked of you and continuing in your own striving and pride? What did you learn from this experience?
 4. This message ends with a call to worship and witness together as a “prophetic People.” What vision do you see for Friends and other people of faith to live out the transforming power of Love in the world?
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Friends World Committee
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ABOUT THE WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP

The Wider Quaker Fellowship is a program of Friends World Committee for Consultation Section of the Americas. Through our mailings we seek to lift up voices of Friends of different countries, languages, cultures and Quaker traditions, and invite all to enter into spiritual community with Friends.

The Fellowship was founded in 1936 by Rufus M. Jones, a North American Quaker teacher, activist and mystic, as a way for like-minded people who were interested in Quaker beliefs and practices to stay in contact with the Religious Society of Friends, while maintaining their own religious affiliation, if any. Today, WQF Fellows live in over 90 countries, and include non-Friends, inquirers, Quakers living in isolated circumstances, and active members and attenders of Friends meetings and churches. Wider Quaker Fellowship depends on the financial support of its readers to provide this service.

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