

# Elisabeth Dearborn: A Sermon in Stones

A Sermon for Seekers Church

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## A Sermon in Stones

*Joshua 4: When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua, "Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan from right where the priests stood and to carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight." So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, and said to them, "Go over before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, "What do these stones mean?" tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever.... "Joshua set up the twelve stones that had been in the middle of the Jordan at the spot where the priests who carried the ark of the covenant had stood. And they are there to this day...."*

*Joshua 24: Joshua speaking to the people, "Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness...Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord...Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.... "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."*

*And the people said..."We too will serve the Lord, because he is our God."*

*"Now then," said Joshua, ..."yield your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel." And the people said to Joshua, "We will serve the Lord our God and obey him." On that day, Joshua ... recorded these things in the Book of the Law of God. Then he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak near the holy place of the Lord. "See," he said to all the people, "this stone will be a witness...It has heard all the words the Lord has said to us. It will be a witness. ... "*

I have brought with me today in the tradition of Joshua a basket of stones. I want to make on the altar with all of you , as Joshua did, a place where the stones witness to God at work and to the intention to be faithful.

Joshua used them when the rivers of the Jordan were held back, enabling the tribes to cross over. Later, when the Israelites vowed to follow the one true God, he used a stone to witness to their intention. I want to use these stones today in much the same way – to mark the presence of God among us and to invite the stones to witness to our intention to be faithful people of God.

I am speaking this morning from a vantage point that is new. Having spent five years in this community as a Quaker-at-large, I now find myself prompted by divine guidance to return to my home among Quakers. This fall I began attending Meeting for Worship again. I had a teacher who used to talk about living our way into the next phase of our Truth. The words, Parker said, dry up if we don't live into them. Last spring I found myself carrying the poem Fierce Love around in my pocket. I lived with it in a way that I have never before lived with a poem I had written. I gave it to people. I heard from a woman in Australia about it after she read it on the Seekers website. A friend in Chicago framed it and put it on

her office wall. Something arriving in that poem spoke to people. Many of you responded to it when it appeared on the [frontpiece](#) of the Seekers Order of Service in Pentecost.

## ***Fierce Love***

*We often talk as if  
The conversation made sense  
And life had a benign order to it.*

*After September 11th, who could believe that?  
Was it a kind of Pentecost?  
Where all we could hear was  
The common language of the stunned heart?  
The heart murmuring in fire?  
Thousands dead,  
Muttering and mourning moving across the land.  
Is this the way the path opens,  
Illusion stripped and  
The raw muscle of life laid bare before us?  
Some say the goal is to live  
With godlike composure  
On the full rush of energy  
Like Dionysius riding the leopard  
Without being torn to pieces.  
I say: do not shout jubilee to me  
When even one of my children is dying.  
Get out the fury of love  
And the keys to the kingdom  
In your kitchen drawer,  
The ones that live with all the stuff  
Of everyday life.  
Take notice of the frail body you inhabit  
And the short life.  
Be about loving  
With a fierceness*

*You have never managed before.*

I began to understand that for me this poem was a kind of wisdom text. In the way Parker recognized, I had named my own Truth in this poem. I needed to live into my words; I needed to be about loving with a fierceness I had never managed before. What is that? Fierce is an odd word to attach to love, especially for a Quaker. I didn't mean it in the hostile sense of the word – more its wild determination.

Isn't this just who Paul was as a disciple? A fierce lover?

That poem arrived after my epic journey last spring to California. I was supported by all of you. There was the eucharist and healing with the man who had been lovers with myself and my mother. There was a three day meeting with my brother and sister sharing the story of our lives. In some families, this is the everyday stuff of Thanksgiving tables or weddings. In my family, the siblings have never before talked in depth as adults together. It opened us all . In particular, it opened my sister's heart to me for the first time. Because I "happened" to be in California for these events, I was just minutes, not hours and a plane ride away, from my cousin when his seventeen year old son died unexpectedly. I felt grateful for God's timing. The origin of the fierceness I speak of in the poem came out of these experiences. I felt firmly – maybe even fiercely – placed where I was needed to knock on the door of a family unpractised in loving.

So, the first stone on this altar today is for **fierce love**.

I have been witness to it in this community, gifted by it, healed by it, one of the celebrators of it. I celebrate the joy, the clarity, the depth, the commitment, the vision, and the persistence here. Thank you for giving me such a lovely and loving container in which to find a deeper truth for myself and the courage to act on it.

Five years ago when I came to Seekers, on a Sunday in Advent when Kate was belly dancing and Marjory was a homeless woman taking the offering, I imagined I would crossover into Seekers' worldview. Over time I've been exploring that. Instead I find myself returning to Quakers quite changed. We use that word – transformed – a little too often these days, but perhaps it applies here.

I have experienced a change of heart arising from participating with all of you in creative and unorthodox ways of embracing the Christian message. I think of the sermon the teenagers gave the day they walked through the door of time back to Paul and Lydia , giving us a chance to visit that Scripture in living flesh. Or the focus on call and spiritual disciplines: I've been writing a letter once a week pretty much for five years. I've sat for a year in a covenant group and for several years in Jubilate, the music group. The support in small groups and spiritual direction enabled me to confront a block I had in my own spiritual development. Some people go to seminary for their course of study; I feel like I've come here as a student.

I entered this community hesitant to live among Christians. I grew up with the anti-Christian sentiments common among Unitarians. I then became part of a spirit based Quaker community. I had a kind of self-satisfaction and resistance to Christian language, story, and beliefs. I also had much direct experience of Jesus at the mystical level. My coming to you five years ago was in response to both. I had the vitality of that mystical journey and the recognition that my resistance to Christianity was "getting old." I was bored with my Bible block. I was also being faithful to my inner guidance to lay down an active life among Quakers.

Nonetheless, in the first years I fussed over translations and lectionary. I couldn't keep the one in my hands from one week to the next or find a Bible I liked. I couldn't get it into my daily schedule or even my weekly schedule at first. I found

the language obtuse, I couldn't understand it. I felt dumb. Everyone else here except Jeffrey and David had grown up on it; what was I doing here anyway? I wrote my letters of spiritual direction avoiding the issue, feeling in response lovingly supported as me. Finally Jesse gave me his Bible: "try this," he said, "I like it."

As I took this new translation and the gift of the friendship it represented, something began to open. I began to study, not whine. Marjory followed this up with a tutorial on the New Testament that I found really engaging. Then, David and Deborah [taught a class](#) on Mark where I realized I was, like learning to ride a bicycle, finally on my way. I live now with a root fed by Scripture. For many of you, this has been your diet from babyhood. I am extremely grateful for your witness, your help, and your companionship. So the first stone is for **fierce love** and the second stone on the altar is for **Christian community as it is lived here**.

The path we are all on is the one that invites us to be faithful to God's call and to move at the pace of guidance. Over these last six months the guidance has been ample. I want to tell you something about it. Last June we took our daughter Shoshanna to The Meeting School for our first visit as a family. I had there an experience which clarified why I had been asked to lay down an active life among Quakers seven years ago. I am referring to the inner guidance which came at that time. While I received this guidance and acted on it seven years ago, I have never understood 'why.' It has been seven years of waiting, hoping someday understanding would come. .

I walked in the door of The Meeting School and unexpectedly re-met the director, a woman who was a participant in the last workshop I led among Friends seven years ago. At the Meeting School in June, seven years later, seeing the same face before me but now as the parent of a child in her school, I suddenly had a felt-sense of the "why." I realized that had I been

active all these seven years, I would have taken up the space Shoshanna needed to see the Quaker path was hers as well. This summer she became clearer, attended the regional gathering of Young Friends, and now identifies herself as a Quaker.

Richard and I spent the morning at the school with faculty . As we left in mid-afternoon, we acknowledged to one another the state of awe which had been upon us since early in the day when we arrived on campus. I shared with him my felt-sense, that I now was understanding that I had stepped back from Friends under divine guidance in order to make space for Shoshanna. The door was now open for me to step back in, he offered, should that be the leading of the Holy Spirit. The question was open.

In the month that followed , the work of the Lord was upon me, as old Quakers used to say. In July I had occasion to sit in Meeting for Worship on six consecutive days. I found the power of the Lord more than once giving rise to messages in meeting. At one point I was given the words of a song.

*You are like no other being  
What you can give no other can give*

Rising to sing the message at the beginning of a Meeting for Worship for the Conduct of Business, I found the clerk rising to end the silent worship and begin the business portion of the Meeting for Worship. What to do? Give the message? Sit down? I choose to sit there with the power of the Lord tumbling over me and through me like diving under a wave at the ocean. In some sense every cell of my being is being tuned to that song: You are like no other being, what you can give no other can give.

It seems an obvious kind of message to receive. Somehow it was evident to me that the place where I am like no other being is in Meeting for Worship. The heart of my practice as a Friend is to live in integrity with the inner voice. I listen for it

as best I may and follow it to the best of my, and others', ability to see clearly what it points to. I was beginning to feel pointed.

The next month, my work changed gears. I had my hands on a woman in the Washington hospice who experienced a physical healing. Two days later she got up and walked out. It seemed like another sign that I was being moved along, not exactly in a fashion I understood.

Experiences like this unnerve me. My prayer life seizes up like an engine with no oil. Instead of breathing into expansion, I flinch and hold my arm over my head and say to God, "What are you going to hit me with next?" I don't welcome these openings. While I am grateful to be of service, I don't feel worthy. I fear God; I fear God will ask of me something I cannot give. My sense of abiding in that which is eternal is shaken.

Into this season of shakiness came a moment of grace. It was a moment of grace informed by Scripture which is why I want to tell you this story.. I am on retreat at a Dominican Ashram on Lake Michigan in Kenosha WI. I am beginning to investigate the Forge, a network of spiritual teachers and leaders. I am asked at one point to make a list of what I am good at it, to make another list of my obstacles, and, third, to name one obstacle to work on. Next I am put into a small group with three others and sent out for a small group session. When it comes my turn to talk, I talk about feeling like flinching in the presence of God. One of my listeners reflects back to me: Have *you* really taken this to God? The room goes quiet for a moment. I can feel something very big in me responding. Like he has just given me the right question.

Isn't it an obvious question? Do any of you get so scared you forget to pray?

The next morning I open my Bible. I open my Bible because I



have walked with you for five years and I now carry a pocket Bible with me when I travel and read the lectionary daily. Over two thousands years of time, I find God's response coming to me right in my very own bed!

*Exodus 33: Then the Lord said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock."*

This tool you have given me for the journey is one many of you know well. It is a tool that was fundamental among early Friends. Their passion came not just from contact with the Holy Spirit; but also from deep immersion in The Word. As a third stone goes on the altar, adding to **fierce love** and **Christian community, the taproot of Scripture and my vow to you that I will continue** this gift you have given me for the rest of my life.

The fourth and last stone is for **gratitude**. : two ways I have been touched and brought alive in this community : One, Shoshanna and Richard and I began to make dinner once a month for the men at Lazarus House. They come there after they've been through an intensive 28-day program getting off the streets from alcohol and drug addiction. They are relearning life skills and our suppers together are part of that. I enjoy putting a lot of love into what these men eat on the night we serve them. In the circle of introductions and prayers before the meal, there comes a time when they all shout to us, "God bless the cooks!" How privileged I am to touch the lives of people who have been on the streets, in prison, alienated, lost, people who are taking courageous steps to find the thread of their own lives again. I am taking out the keys to the kitchen drawers there, inhabiting my one frail body and my one short life and going for one version of fierce loving. Second, the poet in me has grown bigger! I'll close with a poem from this weekend's experience at the National Cathedral with 900 women from many different faiths gathered to share wisdom from the heart. It was a powerful time. I led a

workshop for women in or after menopause which led to this poem.

## ***Egg of Vision***

*So many years living at a certain distance  
From my body or in it, but with effort.  
Then, the blood would come.  
I would drop like a stone  
Into the muck and mud of feeling,  
Lie in warm baths by candlelight,  
Immerse in writing on the clear open pages of my journal,  
Sit in the woods at one with dropping acorns,  
Wilting flowers, and the decomposing compost.  
So it began:  
The years of unfamiliar rhythm,  
Turbulent, sweat-filled moments,  
The occasional and impossible torrents of blood.  
Unexpectedly, the dryness of a desert  
As if now I had the southwest inhabiting me.*

*Slowly (and do we understand the how of this?  
I think not) I came to where I now reside,  
A woman of a certain age.  
I live without a struggle to be in this flesh and bones.  
No monthly nudge attaches me but all my longings,  
Rising like a flock of chickens are around me.  
Ah! I live the big DC city life  
But at last the farm girl in me is happy.  
She has her daily chores,  
Lifting one small egg of vision  
From beneath its feathered warmth.  
I am, it seems hatching hosts of children.  
I run not blood but gratitude.*