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The Wider Quaker Fellowship program of Friends World Committee for Consultation is a ministry of literature. Through our mailings of readings, we seek to lift up voices of Friends of different countries, languages 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 number approximately 2,700, in nearly 100 countries, and include non-Friends, inquirers, Quakers living in isolated circumstances, and even active members and attenders of Friends meetings and churches. The Fellowship does not charge a subscription fee, but depends on donations from its readers and other supporters to cover costs.

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The Mother of the Sons of Zebedee

by

Elizabeth G. Watson

“The Mother of the Sons of Zebedee” from
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By Elizabeth G. Watson

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About the Author

Elizabeth Grill Watson (1914-2006) was known among Quakers as a teacher, writer, activist, and lecturer for many years. She and her husband, George Watson, joined the Religious Society of Friends in 1938, while attending graduate school in Chicago, Illinois. They raised four children and four foster daughters, and worked for many years in areas of concern that coincided with their leadings in ministry. These included racial integration and the rights of other oppressed groups, including women, and gays and lesbians.

The death of their oldest daughter, Sara, in 1964 led Elizabeth to write *Guests of My Life*, about six writers whose works helped her through the grieving process. The stories in *Wisdom's Daughters*, from which this pamphlet is taken, began taking shape in 1984 and were published in 1997 after a long process of Gospel reading, biblical research and imagining, and collaborative efforts with many friends and Friends. One of the stories, "The Woman Who Anointed Jesus," was published under the title *The Crone* by the Wider Quaker Fellowship in late 1990, after it was given as one of the Bible half-hour lectures at New England Yearly Meeting sessions in August of that year. * * *

THE MOTHER OF THE SONS OF ZEBEDEE

Matthew 20:20–28, 27:55–56

He set his face to go to Jerusalem
—LUKE 9:51b

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee
came to him with her sons, and kneeling
before him, she asked a favor of him.

—MATTHEW 20:20

The Story of the Mother of the Sons of Zebedee.

I've been just another housewife, going along, doing my work, gossiping with other women at the well. I've complained about things I didn't understand, more loudly than most, but I really don't have much to complain about. Zebedee's a good man, as good as any in Capernaum. He's been a wonderful father to our children, and he has built his fishing into a prosperous business. We've never wanted for anything.

I was married when I was twelve, and before the year was out we had a child. Zebedee was disappointed that it was a girl, but he didn't say much. Two more daughters followed in succession. Zebedee began to worry. Men always want sons.

Five long years went by and no more children. Our girls have been a great joy, but they could not make up to Zebedee for a son. Then at last God answered our

prayers and gave us a son. Zebedee was overjoyed and named him James. And do you know what that name means? It means “usurper”! James would now usurp his sisters’ place in Zebedee’s affection. The girls laughed about it and took it as a joke. The next year our second son was born. Zebedee gave him a name I liked better, John, which means “God is gracious.” It has been a good name for that son, for he has always been a lovable and loving person, a joy to have around.

Zebedee boasted of his sons all over town. When I went to the well for water, the other women teased me and called me “the mother of the sons of Zebedee”! I always said, “No, I’m the mother of Zebedee’s children, both daughters and sons.” Their father loved the boys so much he found it hard to discipline them, so they grew up boisterous and uninhibited. Later, Jesus called them “sons of thunder” because they were so noisy. There was always laughter and fun where they were, and everyone loved them.

Our house is on the main street of Capernaum, the one with the synagogue at the end. We’ve had good neighbors next door, a man named Simon and his family. He’s also in the fishing business, with his brother Andrew, who also spends a great deal of time at Simon’s house.

Simon’s wife, a girl from our town, seemed to run out of energy after her children began to come. Her mother moved in with them and does most of the work. Frankly, she’s too old to work that hard. I’ve wondered if there is anything wrong with Simon’s wife except

The Author’s Comments

A different version of this story appears in Mark 10:35-45. There James and John, by themselves, ask for the special places. It hardly seems possible that two of the original group of disciples, one of them “the disciple Jesus loves,” could have misunderstood so badly the nature of the movement Jesus had started, particularly after traveling with him for three years. Matthew softens the story by having their mother ask. Matthew’s Gospel is the only one to mention her.

Only a woman richly blessed with *chutzpah* could have asked for such an outrageous thing. I have tried to portray her as breezy and uninhibited. I’m confident, however, that in the end she did understand what the community Jesus wanted to establish was all about and entered the new movement wholeheartedly. Matthew includes her in the group of women present at the crucifixion. She did make the long trip to Jerusalem.

According to tradition, the Fourth Gospel was written by John the disciple. It is full of vivid details, like an eyewitness account. However, most scholars today do not think that Zebedee’s son actually wrote it. They place the writing later. For the sake of the story, however, I have let John plan to write the Fourth Gospel.

Likewise, “the disciple Jesus loved,” mentioned five times in the Gospel of John, is by tradition this same John. I have included his closeness to Jesus in this story. But I think a case can be made that Mary Magdalene was really the “disciple Jesus loved.” [*Editor’s Note: Elizabeth Watson’s understanding of the story of Mary Magdalene is found in chapter 11 of Wisdom’s Daughters.*] * * *

book. Then people of all the generations to come will know about Jesus. Sometimes he says such beautiful things it takes my breath away. Just last night when he was talking to Zebedee and me about Jesus, he said, “In him is life, and the life is the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness will never overcome it” (John 1:4–5).²

I don’t want to be a loudmouthed, gossiping housewife any longer. From now on, I don’t want to talk off the top of my head, the way I’ve done for so many years. I want my words to come out of the depths of truth within me. I want to be a child of the Light. I pray that I may learn to walk in the Light day after day, wherever it may lead me, even to the end of the world. I want to be worthy to live a new life in the community of God. Let it be. * * *

NOTES:

¹ I have substituted the word “God” as less gender-specific than “the Lord,” used in most translations of this passage. In addition, it makes the line scan properly, thus enhancing Isaiah’s poetry.

² This passage appears in the past tense in John’s Gospel. I have put it into the present tense, since in this story John has not yet written his Gospel.

laziness. I’d never say that to her mother, because she and I are very good friends. I enjoy her company. She’s much quieter than I am and is something of a worrier. What she says, however, often has some depth to it and gives me something to think about.

My life is much easier now that our children are grown. Our girls all have families of their own. Zebedee and I just love being grandparents. The boys are still young, and we’ve not pushed them into marriage. Zebedee really likes to have them around. They help with the fishing and he hopes they will take over the business when he can’t work anymore.

My neighbor worries about her son-in-law being a radical, and she has had good reason to be concerned. Simon and his brother actually went down to Judea to investigate a new prophet preaching at the ford in the Jordan River. They wanted our boys to go with them, but their father talked some sense into them and they stayed home. And a good thing, too! Simon and Andrew were gone for weeks. The prophet was arrested and later put to death. Simon and his brother came back to Capernaum somewhat discouraged. I know that Simon’s mother-in-law hoped he would settle down now.

One day the gossip at the well was all about a new rabbi who had moved into a little house on the edge of town. People said he’d been run out of his hometown. My neighbor and I sensed trouble, and it came all too soon.

The next morning Zebedee came home from fishing without the boys. He was upset. He reported that they'd gone off with this new rabbi and just left their father sitting in the boat. Our neighbor came over. She said that Simon and Andrew had not come home either. When she heard what Zebedee said, she looked so stricken I put my arm around her to comfort her. She was burning up with fever. I helped her back home and put her to bed. Her daughter finally got up to take over so her mother could rest.

The new rabbi preached in our synagogue the next morning. His name is Joshua, or Jesus, as many people call him. The whole town turned out to hear him. I was crowded in with the other women at the back and had trouble hearing him. I left early, wanting to look in on my sick neighbor. I found her no better, perhaps a little worse. I did what I could to make her comfortable.

After a time we heard people coming down the street. I went to the door and heard Simon pointing out his house to the rabbi. I thought to myself, that's all his mother-in-law needs, to have a stranger and half the town gathering when she's so sick. Zebedee turned in at our house and motioned me to come home. He was obviously shaken. He said that this Jesus taught with authority. He scolded me for leaving so soon. He said Jesus made his points by telling stories that made people laugh, but they got the message even so.

I went to the door and found the crowd outside Simon's house growing. People were buzzing with the news that Jesus had healed Simon's mother-in-law quite

into trouble." And I know that he told James and John to keep an eye on me too!

I spend nights at home now, but in the day I am with Jesus and the others as we make our plans. Jesus says we will be too conspicuous if we all travel together. We will go in pairs and be responsible for our partners. I am going with Susanna. I have come to love her. We are spiritual friends and pray together each day. I really love all the women. They do not gossip like the women in Capernaum. They have dignity and a sense of purpose. I want to be like them.

Some of them are poor, and some, like Joanna and Susanna, must have come from wealth. They really provide for Jesus and his friends, and I will be able to help them. We all look to Mary Magdalene, who is close to Jesus. She's truly humble, and a friend to everyone.

We are all anxious about what may happen in Jerusalem. But I am determined to be a follower of Jesus to the end. I will not turn back. I will not desert him.

It is strange how life sometimes gives you something you wanted but seemed to lose. I had foolishly wanted special places for my sons in Jesus' movement when I thought he would start a revolution and come to power. Now it is apparent to me that our younger son John has a special place in his teacher's heart. I've heard people speak of him as "the disciple Jesus loves."

John continues to amaze me. From a loud, fun-loving boy, he has grown into a man of great depth. He is making notes about what Jesus says and does, so that someday, when he is old, he can write it all down in a

friends” (John 15:15). Then he added, “I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27).

I knelt there on the hard ground and tears ran down my cheeks. I was blinded by this vision of a new world in which women are called by name and respected, where children live unafraid, where poor people have enough to eat, where lepers are healed and prisoners set free, where no one has power over the others, but we all have power together. He quoted the prophet Isaiah, who had written:

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy
mountain; for the earth will be full of the
knowledge of [God] as the waters cover the sea.

—ISAIAH 11:9¹

Everyone was quiet. He reached out his hand to me and drew me to my feet. Then he called me by name and asked, “Will you follow me too?” I nodded my head, not trusting myself to speak. He said to me, “You are no longer just the mother of the sons and daughters of Zebedee. You are God’s daughter, a member of God’s community.” I blurted out, “Can I go to Jerusalem with you?” He smiled and said, “I want very much for you to come with us.”

Back home I talked to my neighbor. She said, “You go! I will look after Zebedee. I’ll cook his meals and see that he has clean clothes.” When Zebedee came home and I told him all that had happened, he too said, “You go! You can keep an eye on our boys so they won’t get

miraculously. They said that she was out of bed and serving food, not only to her family, but to everyone in sight. Just like her! I’ve never known anyone with such a strong sense of duty.

People were bringing their sick and crippled, and Jesus stood in the doorway and healed them. Even I was impressed by what I saw. Finally the crowd dispersed. I hoped our boys would have sense enough to come home now, but no, they went right along with their new teacher and spent the night at his house.

The next day I asked Zebedee what he intended to do about his sons. He said crossly that he did not intend to do anything about them. They were grown now and could make their own decisions. If they chose to follow Jesus, he would not stand in their way. After all, he said, Jesus might be the Messiah. He did not want to talk to me about it. He stalked out of the house, and I knew it was no use trying to talk sense into him then.

I went next door. My friend seemed quite recovered and less anxious than usual. She told me how she had felt strength go through her when Jesus raised her to her feet. Her energy had come back. She called it a miracle. I asked her how she felt about Simon and Andrew going off like that. She said she was glad they are followers of Jesus. I commented that it would be hard to get along with the men gone, and she merely said, “We’ll manage.” There was no use talking to her either.

Jesus kept calling more people to be his followers. Now the gossip at the well was that some of them are women. I was shocked. What kind of messiah would

call women? And what kind of women would travel around the countryside with a bunch of fishermen? Word of more miraculous healings reached our town, and people repeated some of the parables that Jesus told. I had to admit they were good stories.

Once when Jesus and his followers came back to Capernaum, so many wanted to hear him preach that the synagogue could not hold them all. He asked people to gather on the shore. Then he climbed into Simon's boat and rowed out a bit. His voice carried over the water and people listened intently. I was there too. I didn't hear him say anything about a revolution!

Afterward at the well I met some of the women who travel with him. They were not at all what I expected. They were all modestly dressed and seemed respectable. One of them came up and talked to me. Her name is Mary and she comes from Magdala, another fishing village not far from here. She introduced me to the others. Some of them are as old as I am. I liked them. But I still wondered why Jesus needed women in his group. They wouldn't be much help in fighting the Roman legions!

One day James and John came home and said that the whole group would go to Jerusalem in the spring and celebrate the Passover there. They were already planning the journey, months ahead. They expected that there would probably be some confrontation with the authorities. I learned that Jesus had called more than seventy people. This sounded as though he meant business at last. I said I would like to meet him before

they left. The boys suggested that we go right away. I walked with them to the little house where Jesus has his headquarters.

He was in the courtyard. I picked a moment when he seemed unoccupied. I went up very respectfully and knelt before him, motioning to my sons to kneel with me. "Sir," I said, "my husband and I have given our sons to your movement. We have not had their help and support for weeks at a time. This has gone on now for almost three years. Now I want to ask something of you." He asked what I wanted, and with pride in my voice I said, "Promise me that when you come into power, my sons will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left."

He looked at me sadly and said, "You don't know what you are asking." The others gathered around, complaining about James and John wanting special places. Jesus held up his hands for silence. "You know," he said, "that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you, but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant."

Then he looked at me and said that God's reign is not like Caesar's. Rather, it is a *community*, where everyone is called by name. It is for the poor and the oppressed, outcasts and prisoners, the sick and those who mourn. And, he added, it is for women and children too. He was talking directly to me, but everyone was listening intently. And finally I understood. He looked around the group and said, "I have called you