

Stay Awhile

*Advent Lessons
in Divine Hospitality*

KARA EIDSON

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A Time to Grow: Lenten Lessons from the Garden to the Table

To my parents, Ken and Wanda Eidson:

*Thank you for all the ways you have both taught me
to create spaces in which people know they are loved
and then want to stay awhile.*

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Introduction

I am long on staying, I am slow to leave,
especially when it comes to you, my friend.
You have taught me to slow down and to prop up my feet,
it's the fine art of being who I am.

Sara Groves, "Every Minute"

In the Midwest, there is a common invitation when you come to visit and someone wants you to stick around: "Why don't you pull up a chair and stay awhile?" In a fast-food, packed-schedule, stay-busy culture, the notion of staying awhile has grown a little bit foreign. But sometimes, slowing down and staying awhile is exactly what we need. It is the only way to form deep relationships with others; it is the only way to form a deep relationship with God.

Nothing worthwhile comes quickly or easily. Good things take work to develop, time to mature, and energy to grow. Of the many lessons I took away from my experiences of isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is one I hope to carry throughout my life: few endeavors are more precious than the time we spend with other people—and there is no substitute for quality time.

When guests are scheduled to arrive in our homes, very few of us simply throw open the doors and announce, "We're ready!" The normal state of my home and kitchen are what my father-in-law lovingly refers to as "lived-in," so my husband and I will spend time preparing prior to the arrival of beloved guests. In the same way, Christians must also spend time preparing our hearts, minds, and

souls for the coming Christ. We are called to active anticipation and to do the sacred work of Advent while we wait.

In this Advent study, we will explore how we provide hospitality for guests in our homes, how that extends into our spiritual lives, and how we can apply these lessons to the season of Advent. While understandings of hospitality may vary with setting and culture, as I contemplated the goal of hospitality, I kept coming back to the idea of making another person feel at home. Not always to the home of actual childhood—some people did not find the warm embrace they ought to have there—but what home ought to be: a place where we can be authentically and completely ourselves and where we always know that we will be safe and loved. A place where we can heal and rest from the weariness of a world that has the tendency to wear and weigh us down, despite its infinite amount of beauty. I don't spend a lot of time considering the specifics of heaven, but I suspect arriving there is similar to the moment of hearing those long-awaited words, "Welcome home." The traveler, the student, the wanderer, the soldier, the castaway, the estranged, the unloved, the abused, the broken: we have all longed for those beloved words.

Our brains are hardwired to this setting of home in ways so deeply embedded in us that we cannot consciously adjust them. Sleep studies have shown that half of the brain doesn't enter REM sleep the first night or two that we sleep in a new place. From an evolutionary standpoint, when we sleep in a new place, half of our brain is staying alert, wondering, "Is there a bear in this new cave with me? Will a lion try to eat me during the night?" Despite knowing logically that we are safe and sound in a hotel room, or perfectly safe in a friend's or family member's home, biologically our brains are still wired to be on alert when we sleep in new environments.¹ Even the sleeping brain can tell when we are at home.

So, the ultimate goal of hospitality is to help people feel as if they are "at home" in this archetypal sense, to invite and welcome them into a space that is not their own dwelling and provide an encounter in which they feel safe and loved.

In an academic paper published in 1943, psychologist Abraham Maslow presented a theory that came to be known as Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The theory proposes that only when certain needs are met can human beings then seek the fulfillment of their needs on the

next level. For example, he proposed that humans will not seek out fulfillment of needs such as belonging and love when our physiological needs (for water, food, shelter, etc.) are unmet. While the order, cultural implications, and divisions of Maslow's originally proposed hierarchy have been topics of heated debate in academia for decades, there is still truth to be found in the basic premise; we know instinctively that a starving person will be more concerned with bread than with spiritual enlightenment. Similarly, I believe that experiencing God's kin-dom here on earth requires spaces in which we first feel safe and loved.

Throughout this book, I have chosen to use the word "kin-dom" rather than "kingdom." Ada María Isasi-Díaz, the mother of *mujerista* theology, embraced the term "kin-dom" and brought it into modern theological circles through her work. Having heard the phrase at a monastic retreat, it became a central part of her theology. The word "kingdom" carries insinuations of monarchy and colonialism and even—when applied in theology—engenders God as distinctly male. The use of "kin-dom" transforms the possibilities for God's reign on earth, and it becomes a place in which humans live as equals, and everyone serves one another. "Kin" implies family—a familiarity—that "kingdom" lacks.

This familial sense that accompanies the use of "kin-dom" addresses the need for belonging that exists within all human beings and is even included in Maslow's original hierarchy. We are most likely to initially encounter the kin-dom of God in spaces where others provide intentional hospitality, offering us spaces of love and safety. When we begin to be participants in kin-dom building, it then becomes our obligation to extend that hospitality to other people so that they might also experience the beauty of God's kin-dom here on earth.

When we participate in moments of excellent hospitality, we catch glimpses into the kin-dom of God. There are thin spaces in this world where heaven and earth brush up against each other. Within these thin spaces, we catch glimpses of God's kin-dom. We catch glimpses of what we mean when we dutifully pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," during the Lord's Prayer. We enter sacred space when we offer and receive hospitality, share in abundance, and stay awhile. The thin spaces between heaven and earth that I have experienced most frequently have not been in

church pews or on mountaintops; they have been gatherings around tables with others, surrounded by laughter and love.

This book explores Advent through the lens of hospitality as I understand it, from a personal viewpoint within my own home and context. This is not a treatise on the diversity of cultural understandings of hospitality, although I would love to read that book! I would be remiss not to mention that excellent hospitality may look very different in other cultural contexts. While I briefly touch on hospitality in other cultures in this book, most of the stories contained are about hospitality from the perspective of my own, midwestern U.S. culture.

While many people in the United States view Thanksgiving as the first day of the cultural Christmas season, the drive of capitalism has urged us to begin “the season of buying” earlier with each year that passes. Because of this, it is not uncommon to see Christmas decorations and items adorning the shelves of some stores as early as September. Around Thanksgiving, nearly every store begins playing Christmas music over its speakers, priming us as shoppers to start stocking up for the holiday.

Because American culture loudly declares, “Christmas is here!” by Thanksgiving, many people are taken aback by the lectionary texts on the First Sunday of Advent. People wonder why the church is talking about the end times, and what’s with all the gloom and doom? Where are the shepherds and the cute baby in the manger? The passage we read from Luke on the First Sunday of Advent—“Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place”—is hardly synonymous with the radio playing “All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth” or “Little Drummer Boy.”

Capitalism and pop culture desperately attempt to co-opt one of Christianity’s most sacred and holy seasons, but they get the “spirit of the season” all wrong. In fact, they get the season itself wrong! Christmas—the twelve-day liturgical season celebrating Christ’s birth—does not begin until December 25. Advent, the weeks leading up to Christmas, is not a season of celebration—it is a season of waiting, anticipation, and preparation.

This is often a source of contention when pastors and church staff members begin worship planning for Advent. Clergy often wade directly into the tension of wanting to honor the true nature of the

Advent season while struggling to maintain the satisfaction of the people in the pews. A lot of people expect to hear Christmas songs in church the Sunday after Thanksgiving, but I have tried to encourage the communities I serve to put Christmas back where it belongs, because Christmas means so much more when the season of Advent is respected and observed. I frequently begin worship during this season with the greeting, “It is a joy to worship with you as we continue this season of waiting,” to remind people that Christmas has not yet arrived.

As a child, I remember seeing all the desserts, cookies, and candies spread out across the table for Christmas Day. Usually these were on a different counter or table than the rest of the Christmas feast. I remember always wanting to start at the dessert table—sometimes I still have this urge. (A good friend has settled this dilemma in her family by having pie for breakfast on Christmas morning!) But, inevitably, a responsible adult will step in and say, “You can’t start with dessert—you’ll ruin your dinner.”

Advent is more spiritually complex than not starting with dessert, but the premise is the same. Filling up at the dessert table may seem like a brilliant idea, but it will leave a person feeling slightly sick from all that sugar. Kicking off Christmas when the world tells us it should begin may seem like a fantastic plan, until we realize that we’ve lost the spiritual meaning of Christmas amid all the ribbons and candy canes.

Not only is Advent a time of waiting to celebrate, it is a time of waiting for the coming of Christ in the past, present, and future. We await the arrival of the Christ child in the manger in the past, we await the coming of Christ in our hearts in the present, and we await the second coming of Christ in the future. My own denomination acknowledges this belief in our Holy Communion service, with the entire congregation reciting in unison, “Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.” In Charles Dickens’s novel *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge is visited by the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future. Recalling the three spirits from the novel can be a helpful tool in remembering Advent as a time when we wait for Jesus’ arrival in the past, present, and future.

Stay Awhile includes reflection questions at the end of each chapter that can be utilized by small groups or individuals on their personal

spiritual journey through Advent. There is a chapter for each Sunday during Advent and for Christmas Eve, and an additional chapter for Christmas and beyond. There are also themed daily devotions for the season. Advent always begins on a Sunday, but because December 25 can fall on any day of the week, Advent can be different lengths from one year to the next. Depending on the year you are using this resource, there might be extra daily devotions. Readers can choose to skip the extra days or use them and consider them bonus material.

The final chapter of this book includes worship resources for pastors and church staff who incorporate the themes from *Stay Awhile* into their worship throughout the season. These resources include sermon starters, responsive prayers, community questions, prompts for children's time, suggestions for worship arts, and an interactive children's program for Christmas Eve. All Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version, and the focus Scriptures are mostly drawn from the Revised Common Lectionary for Advent across years A, B, and C.

A companion video series introducing each session is available on Westminster John Knox Press's YouTube channel. These introductory videos are perfect starting points for group study. Find the entire playlist at <http://tiny.cc/StayAwhileVideos>.

Hospitality starts with an invitation. So, we begin this study with the theme of invitation on the First Sunday of Advent. Just as we anticipate hosting loved ones by planning our shopping lists and playlists, making preparations for their arrival, and finally swinging open the door to begin the party, this study will move through the themes of plan, prepare, and welcome, finally urging those gathered to "stay awhile" and "don't be a stranger." So, brew up something warm to drink, pull up a chair, and stay awhile. The most precious guest the world has ever known is coming, and we are all called to get ready.



First Sunday of Advent

INVITE

Jeremiah 33:14–16; Luke 21:25–36

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

Jeremiah 33:14–16

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it

will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Luke 21:25–36

*T*he first year I served as a pastor in a local church, a church member casually invited me to attend the annual gingerbread house party she hosted in her home. When I arrived at her house, I was surprised to find how vastly she had undersold the event in her invitation. The house was full of people, the kitchen and living room were filled with tables and chairs, cheerful Christmas music played in the background, and royal icing covered most visible surfaces. She scheduled the annual party after winter break had begun, so kids were weaving in and out among the adults; some were focused intently on their gingerbread house decorations, some were more interested in eating the candy intended for decorations. There was an entire table just for the candy options, including candy building blocks and chocolates with a candy coating that made them look like colorful rocks from the bottom of a fish tank. The host began introducing me to everyone, including her friends, family, neighbors, and fellow church members. Some people immediately made room for me at one of the tables, and I joined them in decorating my house but also began to join in the cheerful conversation.

I loved the party so much that I decided to replicate the tradition (in minuscule fashion) with my nieces each year during the holiday season—and it has become a beloved family tradition. When my oldest niece approached her middle school years, being overly aware of how many activities she had declared herself “too old for now,” I asked her if she still wanted to decorate gingerbread houses at Christmas. She looked at me with all the sass only a preteen girl can muster and said, “Aunt Kara, that’s what we do at Christmas. Of *course* we’re decorating gingerbread houses!” A single invitation more than fifteen years ago came to shape how my family celebrates the Christmas season.

When we are invited to be ongoing participants in the kin-dom of God, we are not always aware of the magnitude of what we are being invited to join. We have no idea where the invitation might lead us, but we know we will never be alone. God will be with us.

Did I Get Invited?

Do you remember the first time, in childhood or adolescence, when you heard about the social event of the year? A birthday party, a concert, or a trip that had everyone in your social circle excited? It felt as if everyone was talking about it. And then you received the worst news of all: you weren't invited. Do you remember?

I have several memories like this, but the one that sticks out was one New Year's Eve when I was in high school. My group of friends were all going to a concert, and I had not been invited. I stayed home all night, gloomy and dramatic, spending most of the evening in my room pouting. I was angry and crushed. It wasn't the first—or even close to the last—time I was not invited somewhere I wanted to be. But the memory of the sadness of exclusion has stayed with me.

The pain of not being invited to an event we want to go to, being excluded by a group of people we consider good friends, is not something we outgrow, despite growing out of the melodramas of adolescence. Human beings are social creatures—it's one of the reasons why solitary confinement is such a cruel and unusual punishment; we are made for community. God created us to be in communion with God's self but also with other human beings. The human psyche does not do well in the absence of other people.

We long to be invited even to events we have no desire to attend—simply because we want to be included. We want other people to desire our presence and involvement. Animals that evolve as social creatures do so because their species function best in groups; individual survival rates are improved by remaining with the group. As social creatures, humans are hardwired to be members of a group, and we never outgrow our desperate desire to belong. At one time or another, most of us have uttered the words, “I didn't *want to go*. I just wanted to be *invited*.” Sometimes it's not even about the event—it's just knowing that the invitation was there. My husband received some incredible professional football tickets through work, including access to an exclusive suite. I don't like football. It's not an antisports thing—I can speak for hours on something as simple as the art of the bunt in baseball or softball. I'm just not a football fan. So, when my husband asked if I wanted to go to the football game, I insisted he should take someone who would enjoy the game. He and

his father had an amazing time. But I still appreciated that he offered the spot to me first. It feels good to be invited.

Exclusive Invitations

If you have ever participated in planning a wedding, you know how difficult extending invitations can be. There are some agonizing questions over who makes it onto the guest list. The list can be restricted by factors such as budget and venue size. There is great stress in compiling such a list because we may fear leaving someone out or offending someone who thought they should have been invited.

All too often, Christianity becomes an exclusive club that only certain people are allowed to enter. The list of ways Christianity has done this is extensive. I encountered it occasionally in my time as a campus minister. I once was “tabling” on campus—staffing a table set up in a prominent place to promote the ministry—when I was approached by a young man. He wanted to know what people had to believe to be a part of our campus ministry. I was a little bit baffled. Anyone was welcome to come to our ministry events. There was no “belief” requirement to participate. I expected that people in attendance would treat one another with respect and kindness, but no one had to sign a statement of belief to attend worship or activities.

I wasn’t quite sure where he was coming from, but as the conversation progressed, I could sense that he was attempting to lay the groundwork for some sort of argument—his questions had an edge of accusation rather than curiosity. And sure enough, he quickly began lecturing me on our group’s “lack of real Christian values.” He insisted that everyone in the ministry should be required to sign a statement of belief; how else could I, as the pastor, make sure they were “real Christians”? I tried to tell him that measuring an individual’s relationship with the Divine is God’s job, not mine. Eventually, we circled back around to my insistence that “everyone is invited and welcome,” which was the statement he found so problematic, most likely because he came from a Christian tradition more concerned with exclusion than with inclusion.

And this is the beauty of God’s invitation to us, and God’s invitation that we are compelled to share with others: everyone is on the

guest list. Unlike the limited guest list for a wedding or party, everyone is invited to God's kin-dom. There are no budget factors; there are no space restrictions; there are no complex factors to consider; there are no exclusions from God's love.

Invited to Participate

Of the twelve texts that compose the readings from Hebrew Scriptures during Advent in the Revised Common Lectionary, eleven are concerned with or directly address the exile of the people of Israel. Along with the exodus from Egypt, Israel's seventy years of exile in Babylon is one of the defining communal memories of the Jewish people.

Our culture has not accustomed us to think of the pre-Christmas season and exile as subjects that go hand in hand, but the theme of exile in Advent is embedded deep within the Christian tradition. Consider the lyrics to "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel": "O come, O come, Emmanuel, / and ransom captive Israel, / that mourns in lonely exile here / until the Son of God appear." These lyrics were translated from Latin into English by John Mason Neale in the mid-nineteenth century, from a hymn based on a series of antiphons that had been written by monastics in the eighth or ninth century.²

The theme of longing for home and homecoming, a longing to be right with God and reside in the comfort of the homeland once again, is common among the exilic texts. The theme of exile also highlights to us the need for a savior; it leads up to the Christmas story with how desperately the people were longing for a messiah, the one who would both save (rescue them from harm) and deliver (set them free). The lectionary throughout the season of Advent is making a strong argument for the need for the Messiah; in Christianity we interpret this as the need for Jesus, and therefore for all of humanity's need for Christmas.

At the time of the prophet Jeremiah, the Jewish people were not in need of a party, but they were in desperate need of hope. The prophet extends an invitation to hope and goes on to list reasons that the people ought to accept the invitation. Although the text from Jeremiah has a lighter and more hopeful ring than the text from Luke, Jeremiah's proclamation of hope is set in one of Israel's most dire moments.

After the reign of King Solomon, Israel divided into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. The northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians, and the people of Judah lived in fear of being conquered as well for over a century. Although most biblical scholars maintain that Jeremiah was written in the exilic era, the narrative of Jeremiah locates itself around the fall of Jerusalem. Jeremiah's prophetic announcement in chapter 33 recalls the moments when the armies of Babylon were encroaching on Jerusalem, with no hope for victory in sight. Shortly after this declaration (another doomsday prophecy that angered the authorities) Jeremiah would be imprisoned by King Zedekiah, Jerusalem would fall, the streets would be littered with dead, and most of the survivors of this onslaught would be forced to live in exile in Babylon. These are not intended as words for a people on the eve of a great victory; rather, they are words delivered to a people hovering on the doorstep of devastation.

Therefore, in the midst of destruction and desolation, Jeremiah's words suggest even more hope than we might first perceive from our twenty-first-century perspective. In Jeremiah 33:15, we read, "In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land." While the familial line of King David has been cut down, Jeremiah prophesies that a branch may yet still grow from the stump. Jeremiah's words assure the people that even though they feel abandoned, God is still with them. Jeremiah goes on, "In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety" (v. 16). Despite all evidence to the contrary, they will survive, and even thrive, on the other end of these horrific events. Jeremiah's prophecy is an invitation to hope, even when hope seems futile. It is an invitation to believe that God will prevail, an invitation to trust that God is not finished yet. It is an invitation to be a part of the work that God is still doing in the world and to be active participants in the ongoing kingdom of God.

Active Waiting

Jeremiah invites people to be a part of the ongoing kingdom building that God is doing in the world, and Jesus' words in this week's Gospel passage also offer invitation to remain active participants in

the kin-dom work of God. Throughout the history of human thought, people around the world have repeatedly asked similar questions about ethics, morality, and the origins of the universe. Almost every culture or religion has a story of how humankind began, and in a similar fashion, most cultures and religions tell stories about how humankind will end. Christianity's approach to the world's end is far more complicated than its approach to its creation. Throughout the past two millennia, many traditions within Christianity have placed heavy significance on the *eschaton* (end times), an area of study that theologians refer to as *eschatology*. Scriptures concerned with the end times and the second coming of Jesus are cryptic, mysterious, and complicated.

Within my own tradition, I have rarely encountered much interest about the return of Jesus or the end times. I know that my denomination is not alone in this phenomenon. We shy away from speaking of such topics in fear of being confused with those we consider more radical, or even extremist. But we cannot ignore a text just because it makes us ask uncomfortable questions. Indeed, my tradition's liturgy for the sacrament of Holy Communion addresses the return of Jesus with these words: "Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again."

Luke 21 makes clear that the return of Jesus will not be a time of contentment and rest for all people. "Signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken" (vv. 25–26). That sounds terrifying! These are not soothing words of comfort; I think it is safe to say that no one will be turning Luke 21 into a lullaby anytime soon. It is easy to wonder why we begin the season of Advent with a scriptural focus on the end of the world. However, Advent is a season in which we are preparing our hearts, minds, and souls for the coming of Christ in the past, present, and future. If we think of Advent in these terms, it makes sense that we begin the season with Scriptures that evoke the final coming of Christ in the future.

However, throughout the ages, some Christians have clung to these eschatological passages with unhealthy fervor. They have obsessed over predicting the end of the world, looking to political and natural

phenomena around the world to back up their predictions. Many have done so to the point of eschewing their responsibilities as people of God. It is important to remember that many predictions have been made over the past two millennia of the date and time Jesus will return—and to date, all of them have been incorrect.

On the opposite end of this obsession with the apocalypse, sometimes Christianity has painted a safer version of Jesus, the one who holds a lamb and says only, “Let the children come to me.” Some people prefer this safer version of Jesus who does not say such frightening things about heaven and earth passing away. But if we are going to dive into Scripture, we cannot shy away from its complexities, and we cannot simply omit Jesus’ words because they cause discomfort.

There is danger in focusing on Jesus’ words of warning, because we risk giving up the hard work for change and justice in the world. If the world is ending tomorrow, why bother? There is also danger in softening Jesus and ignoring Scripture that makes us uncomfortable; we risk losing the drive to action when we lose Jesus’ message of immediacy. The faithful Christian is called to find a middle ground between these two approaches, to seek out a both-and approach to living out the commands of these texts. We are called to live into the knowledge that Jesus could return at any moment but also live into the hard work of seeking to make God’s kin-dom a reality here on earth, because that return may be thousands of years in the distant future.

Jesus tells his followers in this passage to be alert for the second coming. His words contain an invitation: be alert, for the earthly realm is not eternal. But there are different sorts of waiting. There is the waiting we do in a waiting room when a loved one is having surgery. There is the waiting we do when we are in stand-still traffic. There is the waiting we do when a colleague is late to a scheduled appointment. But all of these are a passive sort of waiting. I cannot speed up the surgeon’s hands, clean up the accident ahead of me on the highway, or hurry along a colleague who is running behind. Instead, Jesus calls us to a different sort of waiting. This is waiting in an active sense, where the focus is on preparation and anticipation. It is the waiting we do when we excitedly prepare for a beloved guest to arrive in our homes.

In my childhood home, the stairs to the second floor provided an excellent place to sit and wait with full view of the front door

and the driveway. I remember sitting and waiting on those steps on many occasions—for a ride, for the bus, but I especially remember the anticipation of sitting and waiting on those steps for the expected arrival of grandparents or visiting friends. As an adult, I am usually waiting for the arrival of guests by doing all the things that I just haven't yet finished: wiping down the kitchen counters one last time, tidying up the kitchen table, making sure that beds are made and fresh towels are available, putting the final touches on something I'm preparing in the kitchen. I had the childhood luxury of passively waiting for visitors, but the adult form of waiting for loved ones to arrive usually involves a great deal of action.

In the same way, being alert does not mean hunkering down in bunkers and waiting for the end. Instead, we wait as people called to continue to do the good work of Jesus Christ until the last moment we are able. Jesus invites us to work for the inbreaking of God's reign on earth. Like most invitations, Jesus' requires a response. But this response goes far beyond a simple yes or no. The invitation is to be a participant, not merely a bystander.

Come as You Are

In stark contrast with the young man who was offended by a ministry that invited anyone to come in, around that same time a young woman contacted me privately via social media, asking, "What do I have to believe to come to your ministry?" I happily responded, "You don't have to believe anything. Our only expectation is that participants show one another respect." She responded to the invitation with active participation and became so involved that she eventually joined our leadership team. Later, I would ask what drew her to our ministry. She told me that our ministry's slogan that year, "Come as You Are," had intrigued her. She found that invitation welcoming and nonjudgmental, suggesting that perhaps the ministry was a safe place where she could do the hard work to figure out her own beliefs without pressure; maybe this was a safe place to ask a lot of questions. She stayed because that's exactly what she found.

We all want to be invited. There is something within each of us that wants to be included. We want to be invited to the table, to the party,

to join the club. When I have finished the liturgy of the Great Thanksgiving and blessed the cup and the bread for Communion, I always get a little giddy when it is time to remind everyone of my favorite part of being a United Methodist: we do not believe the Table belongs to us. When we offer Communion in a United Methodist setting, anyone who wants to follow Jesus is welcome to receive Communion, regardless of membership status in any church. I have the opportunity to extend this invitation each time I preside over the sacrament: “If you seek to follow Jesus, you are welcome to receive Communion here—regardless of your membership in this or any other church.”

Growing up, I experienced a variety of traditions through attending religious services with friends: Roman Catholic mass, vacation Bible school in other Protestant traditions, Mormon youth group, and worship services at an Orthodox church and a synagogue. As a child, I accepted that these faiths were different from my own, and because I was not part of their community, there were certain things from which I would be excluded in worship.

But by the time I had gone through confirmation and begun some intensive Bible study, I understood a lot more than I had earlier in my childhood. In some cases, I struggled more with the exclusion I experienced in these services. I remember a specific occasion when I attended church with one of my friends in my teenage years. I knew before attending the service that when it came time for Communion, I could not receive Communion because I was not a member of their denomination. This had not bothered me prior to the service. Unfortunately, on that day, the clergy person’s message centered around celebrating how the Communion table “unites Christians around the world.” He kept using “Christian,” and all I could think of was the character Inigo Montoya from *Princess Bride*, who said, “You keep using that word; I do not think it means what you think it means.” I was a Christian! So why was I not welcome at this table that allegedly united Christians from around the world? I felt the blood rising in my cheeks and my hands began to clench. How dare he say that all Christians were united in this meal, when I was expected to remain in my seat?

While my own denomination is riddled with extensive flaws of its own, I enthusiastically embrace our theological belief that the Table is for anyone wanting to follow Christ. Because being invited

matters. Invitation is the beginning. The places where heaven and earth meet are often referred to as “thin spaces.” The thin space I experience through Communion allows me a glimpse of God’s kin-dom. So, when I have the privilege of blessing the cup and bread, I feel like I am throwing a joyous and elaborate celebration, and I get the privilege of inviting everyone present; on God’s behalf, I get to invite everyone to the best party in all of creation. We are invited to “come as we are” to the Communion celebration where we meet Jesus over and over again at the Table to experience God’s extravagant grace.

Jesus doesn’t want us to cower in fear when we meet him. On the contrary, he says, “Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” This is an invitation to stand tall with the confidence of a child of God—whatever may come. We are invited to wait for Jesus this Advent season, to stand alert, and we are invited to participate in the difficult and holy work of creating God’s kin-dom here on earth. Jesus is coming, ready or not. How will you invite Christ to come this Advent season?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What does it feel like to be left off the guest list? Recall a time when you were not invited to an event you wanted to attend. How did you feel? How did you handle the situation? Why do you still remember it?
2. Consider an invitation that changed your life, or an invitation that put you in the right place at the right time. Who offered the invitation? How did receiving the invitation change you or the path you took? Why did you respond to the invitation?
3. What is the meaning of “kin-dom,” and how might its use differ from the more traditional usage of “kingdom”? How might kin-dom language influence who feels invited to the Table when we consider all of God’s people?
4. We can respond to God’s invitation by extending invitations of our own. How will you invite others to participate in God’s kin-dom this Advent season? By inviting others to worship, to Bible study, or into your home or by making it clear that everyone is invited to the Table?

5. How will you extend hospitality in the season as we prepare for the arrival of Jesus in the past, present, and future?
6. What is the difference between passive waiting and active waiting? How is Advent a season of active waiting?
7. How can you respond to the invitations contained in Scripture this week? How are you being called to actively participate in the ongoing building of God's kin-dom?

Find the companion video for week one of Advent at <http://tiny.cc/StayAwhileSession1>.

DAILY REFLECTIONS

Monday

While working on *Stay Awhile*, I often listened to Sara Groves's song "Every Minute" from her 2002 album *All Right Here*. In the song, she sings about gathering with family and friends. The song is available on multiple streaming platforms, including YouTube. Take some time to listen to the song today and contemplate how it speaks to hospitality as a spiritual act. How might these themes of hospitality help prepare your soul for the season of Advent?

Tuesday

I was unpacking boxes in my dorm room in Woods Hall when a girl from down the hall came by to introduce herself. She saw me unpacking my Bible and *The United Methodist Hymnal* I had been gifted from my home church, and she excitedly told me she was also a United Methodist. She invited me to join her when she went to the Wesley House for dinner the next day. I had planned on exploring other faith traditions through my college years. Did I really want to be Methodist? That's how I was raised, but what else was out there? Although I went to a lot of other campus ministries in those first few months (one of which even asked me not to return), I kept coming back to the Wesley House. That first casual invitation drew me in, but the hospitality I felt there kept me coming back. It felt like going home.

Where are places that have felt like home for you? What makes a space feel like home? How does this impact your understanding of hospitality? How might this impact your journey as you prepare your heart and mind for the coming of Christ in the past, present, and future?

Wednesday

As an adult, when I check my physical mailbox, I usually expect to find bills and lots of advertisements. With the exceptions of Christmas and birthdays, most mail I receive is boring—at best. But when I received mail as a child, it was a special occasion, because most of the time, it was an invitation. In the days before texting, social media, and evites, this was how we invited one another to attend birthday parties—by sending invitations through the mail. Parents today assure me that this is mostly of a bygone era, but during my childhood years, there was something special about receiving the invitation.

In addition to saying that you were invited, the invitations sometimes hinted at what the theme of the party was going to be. One year I had an ocean-themed birthday party complete with a trip to the local pool and an orca piñata and birthday cake. My invitations to that year's party had an ocean theme. My friends could anticipate what the party would be like, based on that invitation.

Remember the most recent invitation you have received—by mail, text, email. What did it tell you about the event you were invited to attend? What did it convey about the event itself? Use today to consider the invitations contained in Sunday's Scripture. What do they tell us about God? What do they tell us about those who worship God?

Thursday

Within the vast array of vampire myth, there is a long-standing tradition that a vampire cannot enter a person's home unless it receives an invitation. These myths tend to maintain that the threshold of a home holds magical or sacred power, and so an invitation across the threshold contains a great deal of power. What power can you wield

with invitations in your own life? How might you use invitations for building God's kin-dom?

Friday

I learned at an early age that on Halloween night, houses with lit-up front porches are inviting kids to trick-or-treat, and houses with no lights should be skipped. As excited children, we understandably wanted to ring the bell and get candy at every house on the block, but adults taught us that it was rude to ring the bell if the front porch lights were not on. Lights off meant we were not invited—the residents were either not home or not passing out candy.

In the first house my husband and I owned, we usually had more than one hundred trick-or-treaters on Halloween. One Halloween, we purchased our candy and put it in a bowl beside the front door. We then turned on a movie and began waiting for trick-or-treaters to ring the doorbell. About an hour after dark, we realized no one had come to our house. Confused, we looked out the front windows to see dozens of children and parents parading through our cul-de-sac, going from one house to the next. But they were all skipping our house. We suddenly realized we had forgotten to turn on the front porch lights!

On Halloween, the flick of a light switch can provide an invitation. What visible signs in your home or faith community tell people they are invited? What are ways that you can make a space or building more inviting for others? We know that God invites us to be a part of a great cloud of believers, so how can we make sure others receive the invitation?

Saturday

Will I have a place at the table?
What if I sit down, and inside they all laugh.
They might know I am a fraud, a fake, an imposter.
They might see through the manicured presentation;
I might slip and let them see what I really am.
If they see me, will I still be allowed to sit?

What if I sit down and accidentally spill
my sorrow and shame all over the tablecloth,
and they drip down off the table onto the floor?
Those seated before me might see my scars,
hide their disgust between knowing glances,
lose their appetites, and excuse themselves,
leaving me seated at this long table,
alone.

They might see my hideous rage, my calloused indifference,
my self-pity and self-doubt, all the broken pieces.
Will they still break bread with me?

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