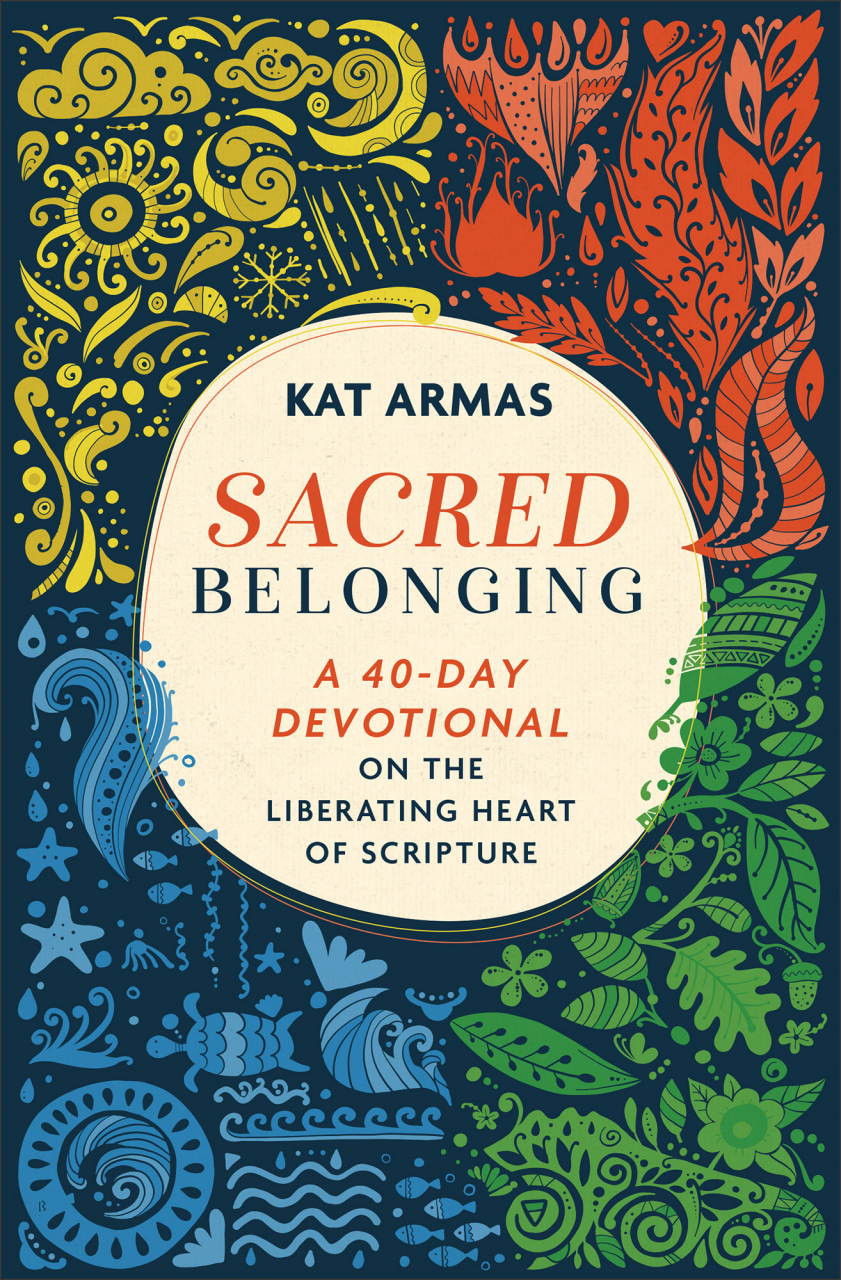
KAT ARMAS
SACRED
BELONGING
A 40-DAY DEVOTIONAL
ON THE LIBERATING HEART OF SCRIPTURE

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To Miss Lady Oak,
who towers above my home like a promise.
Thank you for your inspiration.
May your days continue to be long and fruitful,
even after we're gone.

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INTRODUCTION

I must admit, I haven't read a devotional in years.

They've often felt, for me, like just another thing I must commit to in order to sustain a relationship with a God who lives primarily "in my heart." Devotionals have often pointed me toward what I need to change about myself or what I need to do to be better. To be sure, there are always ways we can grow, things we would do well to change. But perhaps as an alternative to simply focusing on ourselves, we ought to look at the bigger picture—recognizing that we belong to a web of life that is sacred and divine and holy. We are part of something that is far greater than us alone. We are creatures both brilliant and ignorant, significant and insignificant: broken, whole, and healing.

It is Easter Sunday as I write this, the resurrection of Jesus fresh in my mind. And I'm thinking about the words held close on the hearts of the characters in the resurrection story, words that changed everything for them.

"Don't be afraid." (Matt. 28:5)
"Why are you crying?" (John 20:15)
"Who are you looking for?" (John 20:15)
"Put your finger here. Look at my hands." (John 20:27)

I sit in the weight of these words trying to formulate my own, moved by the reality that these words tell a story of a God who doesn't expect us to be anything more or anything less than what we are—whether we are fearful or sad, searching or doubtful.

In this way, the bodily resurrection of Jesus is an invitation to be fully human.

That's what this devotional is about: being human. And with our humanity comes the ability to inquire, to imagine, to dream, to create.

When it comes to Scripture, I wonder what kind of relationship many of us would have to the text if we had all been invited to do those things when we read it. Rather than viewing the Bible as a book of absolutes, what if we were to read it as a diverse book of stories and instructions relating to the human experience in all its messiness and beauty? One of my seminary professors once said that when we read the Bible, we should read it with resistance: constantly asking questions, wrestling with it the way Jacob wrestled with God. May these pages invite you to do just that.

Asian feminist scholar Kwok Pui-lan offers a "postcolonial imagination" as a way of approaching our Bible reading with a "desire, a determination, and a process of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome."[1] I argue that such a syndrome has permeated our being, causing us to view the world as fixed, linear, dichotomous, and functioning in hierarchical relationships of domination and submission. For many of us, the assumptions behind how we perceive the biblical text have brought us to a place of unlearning and unraveling—of decolonizing—where we find ourselves hungry for new, liberating insights into our faith tradition.

With this, two key questions emerge: First, how can the Bible and its tradition speak into today's questions? And second, can we reimagine the biblical world so as to have new horizons opened to us?

The Bible has played a major role in modern colonial relations. It has been used to legitimize the oppression that came from imperial domination of Indigenous populations around the globe. Thus, the Bible became a text of Western imperialism. When the Bible's content, which deals with every aspect of life—political, economic, religious, and historical—was taken out of its original context, the result yielded a depoliticized Bible and, as a consequence, religion in the West was reduced to personal faith and salvation. This allowed Western imperial culture to see anyone outside of its bounds as "other," including the very group to which Jesus belonged: the Jews. The writings of subjected people resisting empire became the very texts used to justify it.[2]

To decolonize the Bible and the ways it has shaped us, we must be able to imagine alternative perspectives that make possible a change

in these power dynamics. This process emphasizes interpretations that are found on the periphery rather than center stage—leading us beyond the familiar to in-between places, places where new ways of thinking and seeing color our reality. To decolonize, we must engage every aspect of life, queering boundaries, and allowing new possibilities to emerge. We must, as activist Carol Adams says, "not dematerialize the sacred or despiritualize matter."[3]

This book is divided into five sections: creation, spirit, the body, wisdom, and the feminine. With an emphasis on these five themes, I invite you on a forty-day journey of repatterning, reimagining, and reweaving Scripture. Some reflections exegete well-known passages in a new light, while others center on telling a story—mostly bits and pieces of my own. I reflect on how I have come to understand the ways that the intricacies of daily life and faith are intertwined. My hope is that my musings might stir up something relatable, whether you align with my thinking or not. This is how theology is done: en conjunto. It is the work of a collective people coming together in their differences and disagreements, seeking to make sense of themselves, the world, and the divine.

Some of my reflections offer questions to ponder. Others don't. Feel free to read this as you wish. You can reflect on each theme or move around as you please. There is no right or wrong way to engage.

You may notice that I acknowledge the existence of deities found in pre-Christian or Indigenous spiritual traditions. This notion was not uncommon in the ancient world, as plenty of Israelites didn't deny other gods existed; they simply believed their God was the only deity worthy of worship.[4] Understanding this can offer us a liberative shift in our mindset and in our thinking, encouraging us to see that we are always perceiving God from our own setting and cultural moment. With this in mind, we are more able to approach diverse cultural beliefs with a posture of respect and understanding, which can awaken in us the audacity to believe that divine wisdom can be found in places we haven't been trained to look. You might also notice that in certain places I refer to "Spirit" without including the accompanying article.

To me, this sounds more intimate, like Spirit is a personal name. It is also a way of communicating that there are many ways to understand and experience the Spirit of the divine.

I also point you to things Native peoples and those living in the ancient world would have found meaning in—things modern Christians generally dismiss or avoid, such as the stars, the cycles of the moon, the four cardinal directions, and so on. It is in reflecting on these that we may find God speaking through creation in fresh ways, in Scripture and beyond.

While I focus on my own experience as a woman, the feminine does not refer only or specifically to women. In colonial thinking, femininity—in contrast to masculinity—has been attached to weakness and inferiority. Decolonizing invites us to wrestle with the feminine within us and also within the divine in order to get a fuller glimpse of both.

My hope is that these words will point you to a belonging deeper than you have dreamed of, that you will see and experience yourself being tethered to your ancestors, to God, and to every created thing. And in exploring this relationality, I also hope that you will get to know divinity as embodied—where you can find a God who is familiar with planting and sewing, good wine and lilies. This is the God to whom we belong: one who is wholly material and wholly spiritual. As close to us as our own skin and far beyond anything our minds can fathom. It is in this paradox where we exist, where our spiritualities find their home. This is where we find sacred belonging.

CREATION

Day 1

Sacred Belonging

All go to the same place;
all come from dust,
and to dust all return.

—Ecclesiastes
3:20 (NIV)

We got the news late one Sunday morning in mid-July that my father-in-law had died unexpectedly.

The phone rang loudly that day. Not only did the noise startle my spouse, Taylor, and me as we prepared to head out to grab lunch, but it also disrupted our lives—steering us in an unexpected direction—the way those dreaded phone calls always do. As soon as Taylor answered, we knew it was bad news. His grandfather's words pulsed through the phone like a heartbeat: "It's your dad. He's gone. I'm so sorry." I felt my heart sink deep into my body, where our daughter had been growing for seven months. Taylor's pale skin began losing its pink hue, the room starkly silent, except for his shallow breathing. I threw my arms around his chest as if to catch him, but my pregnant belly got in the way. After he hung up the phone, we lingered for what seemed like hours before Taylor packed up the car and made the difficult drive to the small country house where his father had raised him.

My father-in-law lived alone, nestled in a few acres of rural land, unburdened by the glare of city lights or the numbing buzz of cars and construction. The first time I visited, the quiet was so loud it made my ears ring as if they were detoxing. It was uncomfortable, but I didn't resist. I knew I needed it.

It was this quiet—and the simplicity that comes with it, I imagine—that enamored my father-in-law to life in the countryside. That kind of life felt foreign to a city girl like me, but Taylor remembers it with

fondness: spending weekends with his knees in the dirt and the soil underneath his fingernails—responding to the needs of the earth like a trusted friend. These are the virtues that formed him.

It came as no surprise, then, that his father was working outdoors when his time came: tending to his land with the same love and devotion he had for years. It wasn't until a few days later that his friends found him lying in the dirt. It was a kind of poetry, taking his final breath on the land he spent his life cultivating—a land that loved him back. It was this relationship that sustained him until his heart gave out. They say he was alone when he died, but I imagine he felt far from it in the presence of the oak tree that hovered above him like a protective guardian.

According to some Indigenous traditions, humans don't claim the land; it is the land that claims us. This is in stark contrast to a colonizing mindset that views land as a commodity to be staked out and sold off. I imagine my father-in-law knew this truth intimately, its power embracing him as he lay to rest as one with the earth that claimed him.

In the opening chapters of Genesis, the Bible affirms a mutual and cyclical relationship between dirt and our bodies. The Bible is far from a book of science, but both agree on this point. Science teaches us that all the elements that make up the human body are found in the soil. This is a testament to what we already know to be true: we belong to the earth, and she belongs to us too.

The "balance of nature" is one of the earliest—and most widely known—theories about the natural world proposed by philosophers and scientists. It suggests that all things are held in a delicate balance with every other entity, with each entity so finely and intricately interwoven that if one is added or taken away, things can potentially go awry. Take, for instance, the case of the decimation of wolves in Yellowstone National Park.

In the 1920s, wolves in Yellowstone were eradicated due to pressure from ranchers worried about their livestock.[1] Before long, elk numbers increased because their predators were gone. But more elk meant that grass and saplings were overgrazed. Soon beavers disappeared and

the riverbanks were left barren. The entire landscape was decimated, killing off species of birds that relied on the foliage for nesting. Because there was no longer any plant life to protect the ground, flooding washed away the soil and erosion progressed, changing the flow of rivers.

This extraordinary course of events was all due to the eradication of wolves, their place in the ecosystem so crucial that eliminating them meant rivers changed course and certain species could no longer survive there.[2]

Everything has a place in the ecosystem; however, the balance of nature theory has also been challenged by ecologists who claim that human activity constantly disturbs the environment. These disturbances (like killing off wolves in Yellowstone) lead to chaotic and dynamic changes, yet they purport that this is the norm in nature. Because humans are an unpredictable part of the ecosystem, a new equilibrium occurs when habitats change—although not necessarily for the better. In recognition of this, humans reintroduced wolves in Yellowstone in 1995, stabilizing its ecosystem once again.

Our world is both stable *and* chaotic, balanced *and* dynamic. Both states exist together yet still affirm the truth that we are part of a web of diversity that needs every creature—from beetle to elephant to deciduous leaf—to function in its fullness. Caring about deforestation and the loss of animal species is a worthwhile endeavor because everything responds to everything else. What happens to the earth happens to us.

In Matthew's Gospel, the story goes that when Jesus was dying, the earth went dark for three hours (27:45). At the moment he cried out and took his last breath, the land shook and the rocks split (27:51). Some interpreters might say this speaks to the supremacy of Jesus over creation, and maybe that's true—particularly when read through a Western lens of hierarchy. But perhaps it's more than that. In Colossians, Paul says that in Jesus all things are held together (1:17), so would it be farfetched to think that the cosmos would tumble into a kind of chaos at his death? I like to imagine that the earth was responding to her relationship to Jesus in a divine connection of sorts.

Through Jesus, God became one with us in this intricate web of life, experiencing alongside us the fullness of what it means to be human.

Perhaps the death of Jesus is also a lesson about the interdependency of all things.

Indeed, nothing happens in our world that doesn't affect something else. When wolves were eliminated, rivers changed course and bird species died out. When Jesus took his final breath, the earth shook and the rocks split. Our world and everything in it tell a story of belonging—a belonging established at the very beginning, in accordance with God's desire for all of creation to be in concert together.

A few days after Taylor's dad died, we found ourselves drowning in paperwork, account numbers, phone calls, and grief. We woke up early one morning and took the long stretch of rural country road to the courthouse to continue figuring out all the things you need to figure out after a parent dies unexpectedly. During this silent drive, we saw a billboard that read, *God recycles. He made you from dust.*

We laughed. It felt so fitting.

From dirt we come and to dirt we will return.

It is through the dirt that we are bound together in a sacred belonging.

- Reflect on the last time you felt like you belonged to a web of life larger than yourself.
- What cultivates belonging in your life?
- What can you nurture with your own hands that connects you to our ecosystem?

Day 2

The Creatures Teach Us

Look at the birds in the sky.
—Matthew 6:26

The first thing Jesus does after he is baptized is go into the wilderness to fast. Mark says that while he's there, he's with the wild animals and the angels. I often wonder if this is where Jesus's connection with the wild took root. From mountains to trees to vineyards, Jesus was a person in tune with his surroundings and aware of the natural world. His teachings were deeply rooted in the land and the wisdom found in the earth and her creatures.

No created thing was void of value or purpose for Christ. Fish and seeds had the potential to teach the most important things about loving neighbors and taking care of the poor. Observe the birds, Jesus advised, notice the lilies of the field (Matt. 6:26, 28). What if we took him seriously in our daily routines and did just that? What if we truly considered what wisdom might be found in all created things?

It was early spring when we moved into our first home in Tennessee. The flowers had just begun to bud and the birds to nest. I was doing my own nesting too—unpacking my belongings from boxes while my belly grew rounder and fuller each day. Life was flourishing around me and within me.

Taylor and I often spent our mornings sitting in foldable camping chairs in our backyard, watching the sun peek over our wooden fence, the steam rising from our cups of coffee, the oak trees towering above our heads. It was quiet and pleasant. Until it wasn't.

Our peaceful mornings ended when we realized we weren't alone in our new house. A family of starlings had made the wooden slabs of our carport their home before we moved in, and they made sure we knew it.

Each day as we sat to enjoy the morning, we were met with the fury of parent starlings perched above our heads tirelessly squawking at the top of their little bird-lungs in an attempt to defend their space. I thought their behavior was poetic at first—a lesson in parenting as I prepared to become a parent myself. A reminder of God as a mother bird, perhaps, protecting her young. But these sentiments quickly changed when I could no longer relax in my own backyard.

"What kind of birds are those?" I asked Taylor one morning, frustrated.

"Oh, those are starlings."

"What do you know about them?"

"Well, I know they're annoying."

We laughed. A quick Google search informed me that "how to stop starlings from nesting on my roof" is a common concern among folks on the internet. Not only are they ubiquitous and invasive, but starlings are also known for being loud and obnoxious wherever they find themselves.

In addition to validating my irritation, I learned that starlings are able to mimic most sounds they hear: from car alarms to human speech, regularly embedding sounds from their surroundings into their own calls. In fact, their diverse and complex vocalizations make starlings a popular subject of research into the evolution of human language.

The sound of the starling is so unique one even became a muse to Mozart. He was so enthralled by a starling he heard at a pet store, Mozart brought it home and fashioned some of his music after its songs.[1] Learning this amused me. Perhaps it's no coincidence that some of the most hated birds in our midst have also served as inspiration for the world's most renowned musical compositions.

Suddenly I find myself marveling at the starling, remembering Jesus's invitation to notice the birds of the air (Matt. 6:26). So I started doing just that. I watched the starling for weeks, whispering *good morning* to her each day. She watched me back—a simple kind of reciprocity. I soon began to appreciate her forwardness, her insistence that I notice her.

This is what I love most about Jesus: he had a knack for always pointing us to the overlooked—from the human sitting in the corner to the creature squawking from her nest. They're there, they've always been there, but Jesus invites us to notice, to look closely.

One of my favorite examples of this is found in the story of the poor widow who put everything she had into the collection box of the temple treasury. The narrative begins by saying that Jesus sat and observed how the crowd was giving their money (Mark 12:41–44). I wonder what specific things Jesus was looking for. Was it her? Or was he simply observing, as he often did, noticing the things we tend to miss: the birds, the poor, the flowers? After seeing what she has done, Jesus calls the disciples over and encourages them to observe her too.

I've heard countless sermons praising this woman for her sacrificial giving and prompting that we should do the same. But when I read this story, I don't discern Jesus telling the disciples, "Do what she does." Instead, I discern Jesus saying first and foremost, "Look at this woman." Jesus wasn't giving the disciples a guilt trip, as might be implied. Instead, he invited them simply to notice—the disregarded, the pushed aside, the last people we'd look to for wisdom. *Pay attention to her.*

Barbara Brown Taylor notes that in order to see all there is to see, we must learn to look at the world not just once but twice.[2] The kin-dom of God is this way: hidden in plain sight (see invitation 7 for more on the kin-dom of God). And Jesus beckons us to look and then look closer.

But this kind of awareness doesn't come easy. To learn from what nature is telling us, we have to stop long enough to notice—to observe, to listen to how it might be speaking or what it might be teaching us—and this cannot be done with an oversaturated mind. Richard Rohr comments that noticing the natural world "takes contemplative practice, stopping our busy and superficial minds long enough to see the beauty, allow the truth, and protect the inherent goodness of what it is—whether it profits me, pleases me, or not."[3]

I think Job was privy to this. He may be known for his unrelenting faith in God, but Job stands out to me because of the way he understood the natural world. When his friend tells him to repent so that his fortune will be restored, Job reminds him that divine wisdom can be found in the places we aren't trained to look. Job says, "Ask Behemoth and he will teach you, the birds in the sky, and they will tell you; or

talk to earth, and it will teach you; the fish of the sea will recount it for you" (Job 12:7–8).

Scripture reminds us that divine wisdom flows through all created things if we're willing to listen. We can discover much from plants and animals that know the intimate details of survival and flourishing. This is one of the greatest parts of being human: finding kinship with all of creation as we learn more about ourselves and the divine.

It's important to understand how the natural world communicates to us. Oftentimes, we tend to reduce both people and nature to empty vessels—listening only for what God might speak *through* them instead of what wisdom they might be imparting themselves. As Anishinaabe writer Patty Krawec observes, "Listening only for what God might be saying through something diminishes our investment in the world around us and disconnects us from everything, including people, because we don't listen to them either."[4]

After advising his followers to notice the birds of the air, Jesus continues his teaching: "They don't sow seed or harvest grain or gather crops into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you worth much more than they are?" (Matt. 6:26). Through the eyes of Jesus, we get a glimpse of the value of the natural world and the beauty he sees in it.

Sure, a human life is valued more than a bird's life, according to Jesus, but this doesn't mean that birds have no worth. In fact, his point rests on the truth that birds, too, have value. That each one is taken care of by God and provided for.

If anything, it's the birds that remind us that we are worthy.

My neighbor the starling did just that—demanding I notice her and her young. She squawked her truth, reminding me of her value and of my own.

- What wisdom has the natural world communicated to you, whether about herself, yourself, or about the divine?
- How might you engage in the kind of awareness that Jesus had? Where might you take the opportunity to notice, to observe, and to listen?