



present

THE GIFT OF BEING ALL IN,
RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE

COURTNEY ELLIS

In the pages of *Present* I felt the gentle nudge of the Spirit urging me out onto my back patio to listen for the calls of the chickadees and blue jays. As a fellow pastor and parent, Courtney Ellis's hard-won wisdom and humorous encouragement connected deeply with my restless soul. This book will embrace the weary, the too busy, and anyone longing to be more present in their daily lives—and point them to the rest and presence of Jesus.

APRIL FIET, pastor and author of *The Sacred Pulse: Holy Rhythms for Overwhelmed Souls*



I finished Courtney's book on the same day I reached the end of a week-long project. Just when I was about to move on to my next chore, I could almost hear Courtney telling me to pause, to be fully present in this moment. So I surveyed my work and savored a job well done, and in so doing, I crowned it with a mysterious "something more" that Courtney invites you to experience for yourself in this volume of personal stories suffused with scriptural lessons.

DR. CHRISTOPHER UPHAM, philosopher, father, and farmer



Courtney Ellis encourages us to slow down, to look up, to look around, and to witness the relationships and the holy ground that surround us. Being *present in the now* and recognizing *the gift of being all in* are difficult to do, but the author presents us with ways to position our lives and attitudes so these things can become a reality. Whether you are well-seasoned in your spiritual life or a novice like most of us, Ellis's book will bring you into a deeper understanding of the richness of living into every moment.

REV. DR. ROSS PURDY, pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Burbank, CA

Those of us who struggle with a sense of rootlessness, discontent, and distraction will find hope in the pages of *Present*. With humility and humor, Courtney Ellis weaves the story of her own struggles together with the convictions and wisdom of her Christian faith, in order to shed light on a path that leads to growth. This book provides a hopeful and grounded alternative to the unattentive and rushed haze that so many call living.

**REV. DR. JACKSON CLELLAND, pastor, Presbyterian
Church of the Master, Mission Viejo, CA**



We hear the well-meaning advice that we're supposed to bloom where we've been planted. But when our mobile culture and consumerist mindset keep us always on the move, we learn to keep our roots shallow and our connections superficial. Courtney Ellis challenges us to be all in, right where we are. *Present* is an invitation to explore what it means to show up for the abundant life God offers us, written with Ellis's trademark honesty, humor, and insight. Highly recommended!

**MICHELLE VAN LOON, author of *Born to Wander:*
*Recovering the Value of Our Pilgrim Identity***



This book is a great gift. Courtney Ellis helps us see the grace that surrounds us right where we are, and she invites us into the practices and postures that will permit us to partake of that grace. Since being a person means living in a particular time and place and with a particular people—and in no other time or place and with no other people—we need to heed this invitation to live the particular lives that God calls us to, and in which we will see his faithfulness.

**DR. CHRIS BLUMHOFER, associate professor of
New Testament, Fuller Theological Seminary**

The author shares personal stories and Scripture messages to help folks understand how we can bloom where we are planted. This book is a joy to read and helpful for those of us living in the same place for many years as well as those who relocate frequently.

PASTOR CAROL P. TAYLOR, United Church of Beloit, WI



Sometimes God calls us to stay. With wit, insight, and a pastor's heart, Rev. Courtney Ellis helps us honor this call. By sharing how she has deepened her own connections, Courtney guides us in how we, too, can stay put well.

REV. JON SAUR, senior pastor, StoneBridge Community Church, Simi Valley, CA



With a posture of generosity and a writing style that is both warm and engaging, Rev. Courtney Ellis's tender care for her readers shines through in *Present*. In this book, Courtney gently invites us to return to this moment *and* to be with this moment, while honoring the nuance and complexity of what it means to be present. You will not only walk away from this book with the deep wisdom she offers, but also be further motivated to prioritize the practice of presence.

HOLLY K. OXHANDLER, PhD, LMSW, associate dean for research and faculty development at Baylor University's Diana R. Garland School of Social Work, cohost of *CXMH: A Podcast on Faith & Mental Health*, and author of *The Soul of the Helper*

In *Present*, Courtney extends an invitation that's both graceful and practical: the invitation to live lives that bless us, the people around us, and our communities with the gift of being truly rooted.

ROBERT VORE, therapist and cohost of *CXMH: A Podcast on Faith & Mental Health*



With her signature wit, storytelling, and grace, Ellis invites us off the treadmill of searching for the next big thing, daring us to take up the adventure of staying right where we are. This book is somehow a challenge and a balm, and most of all, a reminder of the grace and care of a deeply present God.

LYNDSEY MEDFORD, author of *My Body and Other Crumbling Empires: Lessons for Healing in a World That Is Sick*



Only Courtney Ellis can quote Bonhoeffer, *The Princess Bride*, and St. Anne (Lamott) while challenging us to better know and be known. Her stories are as grounded as her family's backyard garden, springing from the soil of making peace with a place. As a Midwestern transplant to California, Ellis shares perspective through geography and season, recounting tales of blizzards, whitewater, and thunderstorms alongside the joys of noticing the birds of the air and West Coast lilies of the field. The simple act of reading this book and showing up on a neighbor's front step can revolutionize the world.

**BETHANY RYDMARK, landscape architect,
garden designer, and writer**

present

**THE GIFT OF BEING ALL IN,
RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE**

COURTNEY ELLIS



AspirePress

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To Sonia Justl Ellis—
a present of a friend



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Foreword

by Aarik Danielsen

I WASTED TIME treating some verbs as holier than others.

Attending a Christian university—where missions was elevated and every spiritual stirring encouraged—*go* seemed like the most sacred action word. A decade and a head full of Wendell Berry dreams later, *stay* piously dug in its heels.

I have been the young man who chased a calling 1,257 miles from home to college; the twenty-something who followed God around the globe yet failed to belong anywhere.

I have also planted roots, taking up a front-porch seat to watch my Midwest community change by degrees. And I have stayed long enough at the same job, the same church, the same zip code—well after so many left—to watch myself become a ghost.

We place our faith in verbs because of myths we learn to carry. In the book you are about to read, my friend Courtney Ellis gently strips such myths away with tiny but profound proverbs, and observations from the longer view. There are no greener pastures, no perfect choices. My life sounds an “amen” to Courtney’s words.

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Stay or go, stake or uproot—no verb is inherently holy. Our words, and the choices they represent, become virtuous only when acted on by the most proper noun there is: God, the ever-present one, in whom we live and move and have our being.

But Courtney does so much more here, demonstrating how presence is a daily practice and a sermon we must preach to ourselves—that, yes, we can find God in whatever place we're in and love particular people particularly.

Courtney is, too, good a writer—and pastor—to spell out how to achieve present-tense living, as if it were a skill easily mastered rather than an art to refine. Instead, she describes her life and the lives of others in process toward presence. She asks good questions, ones worth wrestling.

Most importantly, she acquaints us with a God whose presence is as boundless as all the oceans set side by side—yet closer than your next heartbeat. When we fix our gaze on this God, we become what we behold. He teaches us to cherish any and every corner of the world he animates and inhabits, to hold them close the way he does.

Some passages of *Present* immediately feel like freedom; others lay out limits. Keep reading. Courtney never calls us to settle, but to grow settled from the inside out. She describes a life limited by love: bound by people, places, and things, but shot through with God's promises.

Growing satisfied within his presence, we are free to stop asking too much of others, enjoying every moment and everyone—including ourselves—exactly as they are.

Foreword

Mary Oliver wanted to come alive in quiet woods. Jack Kerouac hit the highways in search of mad people. Eugene Peterson favored a long obedience in the same direction. Any and all our ways of moving through the world can be holy, once we let God set the boundaries of our lives, trusting he will fill them with himself.

—Aarik Danielsen
Journalist and *Fathom Mag* columnist
June 2022



INTRODUCTION

Wherever You Are

Each day this soul becomes more amazed.

—Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*

TWO DECADES AGO, I attended college just outside Chicago. The student body was geographically quite diverse, full of young adults from all fifty states and multiple countries besides. For this reason, many of the welcome-to-a-liberal-arts-institution mixers focused on our places of origin.

“Where are you from?” we’d be invited to ask one another, or “Tell me about your hometown,” or, in one ill-conceived instance, “Sit at the lunch table designated for your state!” (There was only one guy from Wyoming, and oh my word, that giant group of Texans was SO LOUD.) For some students, this question was easy to answer. They’d lived in the same town their entire lives until launching off to college. For others it was a little more complicated—Cleveland and *then* Binghamton, New York; San Diego *until* their parents’ divorce, and after that, Seattle.

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Then there were those who would pause, get a little glassy-eyed, and admit they weren't sure how to even begin answering the question. "Military brat or pastor's kid?" became the running joke, since both the military and the ministry tended to move a family from place to place without time to settle for long.

Where is your home? Is home a place where you've always lived, somewhere you long for, or just the spot you lay your head to rest tonight? What *makes* a home? Why do we sometimes yearn for home and other times feel we will go crazy if we don't leave it? What might it mean to be *at home* no matter where we are?

My husband Daryl and I are raising three pastors' kids ourselves these days. Nearly a decade ago, when we completed background checks as part of our hiring process at the California church we currently serve, we realized we'd moved six times in ten years. Since our wedding, we'd lived on both coasts, in the Midwest, and in the South.

"A stopover in Colorado and we'd have a BINGO," I told him.

"That isn't really how it works," he said. This is his default response when I tell him stuff like "Our printer is out of lasers."

Though we were proud that we'd learned to pack up our entire kitchen in an hour without breaking a glass, we were also very tired. Exhausted, really. The constant ache of jussst beginning to grow roots and then discovering we'd need to pull them up time and time again, leaving a piece of our hearts behind with a church and friends and colleagues, was wearing on both of us. These big, painful pieces were the most obvious, but there

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were also hundreds of micro-stresses involved each time we relocated: finding a new doctor and dentist and mechanic; learning the rhythms of a different local culture; discovering through a series of subtle faux pas that it's pronounced *Loo-ville*, not Looie-ville, or that no one wears high heels to a graveside service during the rainy season in farm country because you will sink right into the lawn, lose a shoe, and end up leading the closing prayers while standing on one foot. (Not that this has ever happened to me, you understand. At least not more than twice.)

Our edges had become so ragged they were more fringe than fabric, so Daryl and I made a pact to try and make a go of it—a real, honest go—this time. To do the necessary deep work to stay in one place for a decade or longer. To be all in, right here, right now. To practice presence right now, *in* the present, to put it in a more whimsical way. With our graduate school and ministerial training finally complete, nothing would push us to move on except us. Or God. (Always a possible spoiler, the Almighty.) Three years in, at a career inflection point, we doubled down. Then, mid-pandemic, watching so many colleagues around the country pull up their anchors, leave their calls, or start over in new places, we committed ourselves once again to the community in front of us. Like Ruth and Naomi, we wanted *these* people to be *our* people, their landscape to be our landscape, and their God to be

Present is an invitation to be all here, right where we are, wherever that is, for as long as God invites.

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ours, too. We wanted to be here, and in committing to one place, to find our being here.

This is not at all a word of judgment against anyone who has recently moved or needs to do so soon. Each of us must listen to the siren song of God, and our particular story and callings will, of course, differ from yours. *Present* is, instead, an invitation to be all here, right where we are, wherever that is, for as long as God invites.

Rootedness

There is deep biblical precedent for committing to people and place. Rootedness is a sign of blessing, an intentionality that reflects the favor of God. After the second Advent of Jesus, one of the signs of the fulfillment of God's kingdom will be the restful permanence of God's people. Nomads no longer, they will finally be able to enjoy the fruits of their labor. Jeremiah puts it this way:

*Again you will plant vineyards
on the hills of Samaria;
the farmers will plant them
and enjoy their fruit.¹*

Unlike the captives and the exiles—or even Jesus himself, who had nowhere to lay his head—God's resurrected people will be invited to settle in permanently to the new creation. In these homes, war and famine will never threaten, job transfers won't exist, and borders won't separate families. We will, at last—at long, long last—be a people at rest.

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Early in the school year, our middle son, Wilson, came home telling us of a classmate who moved away. Tears in his eyes, he curled into Daryl's lap and said, "I didn't even have a chance to get to know her yet!" These separations hurt, no matter our age. My great-grandmother lived to be one hundred and three, and near the end of her life often lamented, "All my friends are dead!" There is a great deal of unavoidable separation baked into life already. Knowing this, shouldn't we do all that's in our power to be all in where we are while we can?

Rootedness is a sign of blessing, an intentionality that reflects the favor of God.

Extending from the biblical witness (which we will dig into in depth shortly), there is a deep and longstanding Christian tradition of stability, beginning with the first monastics in the early centuries after the death and resurrection of Jesus and continuing on to today. We haven't talked much about it in the contemporary western church; we often prefer the next new and exciting thing over the slow, quiet wisdom of the ancient tradition. This is starting to shift, and I'm so happy to see it. The idea of faithful stability is not novel, but it is, perhaps, one whose time is coming again in greater awareness and fullness. If this book can be even a small part of that reawakening, I will be forever grateful.

The Beginning

Six years ago, Daryl and I prayerfully decided to stop looking up and around and commit to *this* place. To *these* people. A year

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ago, we recommitted to it all once again. In doing so, we found our lives transformed. In a world marked by transience, envy, and rootlessness, committing to staying put is a radical, unusual act. Choosing stability can seem boring or easy; inertia is a powerful force, after all. But the truth is, there is tremendous growth on offer when we stop holding a community at arms' length and open ourselves to the blessing of stability, the grace of limits, and the joy of presence. This book is divided into sections

God calls us to stability, but never to stay in situations where our spiritual, emotional, or physical health is at risk.

around these three gifts, each of which comes with our increased attention to being all in—fully present, right where we are.

Before we go on, however, I must add one important caveat. There is a time to seek stability, and there is a time when God will call us onward. We can parse the details of when to take that job offer in another city or retire to the Florida panhandle or help plant a new church far

from our current abode. Stability's opposite is *instability*, not thoughtful movement. God calls Abraham to leave his homeland and then to stay in a new land for a long time. God inspires Ruth to follow Naomi across borders and cultures. God pushes Paul from his comfortable home in Tarsus to Philippi, Corinth, and Thessalonica. These are matters for prayer, discernment, and wisdom. It is not always God's call to stay put.

And there are still other times when we *must* go: when remaining in one place would expose us to harm or abuse. Hear

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me plainly: If your spouse or partner is violent toward you, it is time to go. If your church seeks to silence or control you rather than shepherd and care for you, it's likely God will call you to find a new ecclesial home. In instances like these, the virtue of stability has been broken by the malevolence of others. Please check out the resources listed in the endnotes for help in getting out safely.² God calls us to stability, but never to stay in situations where our spiritual, emotional, or physical health is at risk. This is not stability, but bondage. God calls us to freedom.

Of course, even aside from instances of abuse, trauma, or neglect, not all instability is chosen. The majority is either unexpected or thrust upon us. You may be serving in the military, attending school, or working in a profession that is known for moving its employees around. Or perhaps you *love* being on the go and bristle at the idea of growing roots when wings seem much more fun. I hear you. Yet even if one of these describes you, I'd argue that being fully where you are *right now*, even if it's only for a few months or weeks, can itself be profoundly transforming. There's a significant psychological difference between living out of a suitcase and putting those clothes into bureau drawers, even if you know you may need to pack them up again soon. In a way, it takes even more courage to press in to a local community if you know you'll be leaving it—and it can bring about some powerful growth and goodness, even in a short time. More on that to come.

For now, let's begin with some full disclosure: I'm writing this book from Southern California. Orange County, to be particular. Home of ridiculously nice weather, killer tacos, and enough outdoor activities to please surfers, swimmers, and hikers alike.

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Yesterday my neighbor, who works for a Huge-but-Not-to-Be-Named coffee chain, dropped two pounds of medium roast on my doorstep just because. We are growing clementines *in our backyard*. We *have* a backyard.

“Sure,” you might say, “easy for *you* to find contentment where you are. *I* live somewhere *very* different. *I* can’t drive to the beach in under an hour. *I* live surrounded by snow/floods/deer ticks/sirens/famine/neighbors with wind chime collections.”

Fair enough.

I do love California. It’s not a hard place to love. Despite its admitted excesses (we recently endured a recall election of our governor with options on the ballot that included a one-named starlet whose only qualification was “entertainer,” and I just ... I can’t), it’s hard to argue with orange groves and constant sunshine.

But here’s the thing: I grew up in northern Wisconsin. Few places in America feel as far removed from those wild, snowy forests and loon-studded lakes as my manicured, roasting, palm-tree-lined suburb. By September each year, I am practically vibrating with a near-constant ache for autumns where I might breathe crisp, apple-y air instead of choking wildfire smoke. I miss the solitude, the small towns, the pace of life more contemplative than constantly on the go. I miss the cost of living being plausible and not utterly bonkers. I miss not knowing anyone who had their sweet-sixteen party on a yacht.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m grateful to be here in California. I wouldn’t trade it. I’m doing the spiritual work to be all in, right

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here for a long time, not because the place or its people are perfect—no place is heaven short of, well, heaven. There is not a location on this earth that doesn't have its share of troubles, nor a people, nor a culture. That's part of the transience trap—believing that being somewhere else would finally *complete* us when really, the struggle is within us. As Abba Moses, one of the Desert Fathers, once encouraged a discontented pilgrim, “Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.”³

Present began as a personal project. I wanted to learn this new way of being for myself. After years of transitional living, I was desperate to find a way to stay put. But even as Daryl and I made plans to hunker down for the long haul, I knew I could be quite capable of living in the same place—for months (years, even!)—without ever truly committing to it. Many of us live with one foot out the door of the home in which God has placed us, our eyes not meeting those of our neighbors but instead searching beyond their shoulders for the greener pastures that might lie just beyond. I was committed to learning, but first I had a whole slew of bad habits that needed to be undone. Habits of biding my time, of pulling back and away, of staying disconnected. Habits of trying to see what might be next any time I grew the tiniest bit discontent with what was right in front of me. When we fail to assume the longevity of place or relationship,

When we fail to assume the longevity of place or relationship, it is far too easy to take all sorts of unhealthy shortcuts.

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it is far too easy to take all sorts of unhealthy shortcuts. We avoid conflict rather than courageously working it through. We let our homes fall into disrepair rather than get out our tools to fix and polish. We allow weeds to creep into the garden, hoping

Learning to be present is a great adventure, an avenue to deeper fellowship with God and our neighbors.

the labor to remove them will fall to the next person in line. I wanted to undo these bad habits, to find a new path; but to be honest, I wasn't even sure where to start.

Yet even as I began standing at the shore of this new ocean of possibility, I was suddenly thrown into scarily deep waters. The pandemic locked down California overnight, and suddenly my circle

of in-person contacts shrunk to a masked handful. Not only were we not going to move away anytime soon, we weren't even going on *vacation*. With all of my speaking engagements and conferences canceled, I watched my life constrict to our home, our street, our local park. I expected to feel trapped—and at times, I did. I expected to feel afraid—and at times, I did. But even as we grieved, living through a long season of uncertainty and suffering, I discovered new depths to God's love through the gift of the present. We do not serve a God who is far off, but one made incarnate in Jesus Christ, present to us by the Holy Spirit right here, right now, no matter what is swirling around us. God is our rock, tethering us to the present out of love.

As to my own story, after years of transience and instability, I'm working to stay right here, right where I am: not because

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my place is perfect, but because I've come to believe that the present is a gift. I don't know what the future holds for my little family of five. Even in the long months between the writing and the publication of this book, God may move us somewhere new. But my heart and hope is that this lesson is one I'll be allowed to learn for a very long time to come.

So how can we be *here*, wherever our *here* happens to be? Whether you'll only be in one place for a few weeks or you've never left your town of birth, join me in a celebration and exploration of all things stable, limited, and local as we seek to follow Jesus to the ends of the earth by sitting with him right here at home, enjoying the blessing of stability, the grace of limits, and the joy of presence.

My prayer, dear reader, is that this book might serve as a companion to you as you connect more deeply with this God, too. Learning to be present is a great adventure, an avenue to deeper fellowship with God and our neighbors, and a call to each of us to open our hands and accept the gift.

It's a profoundly good one.

Don't let it pass you by.

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Questions for the Present

1

Where is home for you? Is that a difficult or an easy question to answer?

2

Read Jeremiah 31:1–5. How does this passage impact your idea of home?

3

When you think of home, what emotions arise for you?

4

Do you struggle to be still? Why or why not?

5

How might being present right where you are be a spiritual practice?



PART I

The Blessing of Stability

**If your life is backwards, you must die
before you can live.**

—PAUL J. PASTOR, *The Listening Day*



CHAPTER 1

Death to Ferns

It's not magic. It's work.

—Andrew Peterson, *Adorning the Dark*

I KILL A LOT of plants.

I don't mean to, of course. When I bring them home from the nursery in their lacquered pots, I know the plans I have for them, and those plans are good.

Plans to water them the precise amount they need; plans to mist their leaves, to check for disease, to turn them around so their stems grow straight instead of leaning too far toward the window. With apologies to the Lord and Jeremiah, I have plans to prosper and not to harm them. I carry out these plans faithfully for two or three whole days, and then I forget that my plants are in fact natural beings, alive and in need of attention, and I fail to notice them again until they are much too far gone for salvation.

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There are many reasons for this, from basic moral failings (Sloth! Pride! Addiction to bad television!) to the realities of parenting that sometimes move too quickly for a meal at the dinner table, much less a check of soil pH levels. Perhaps I buy the wrong plants from the wrong nurseries. For sure I don't pay enough attention to where the sunlight reaches the shelves.

But I believe the real reason is this: For years, Daryl and I moved and moved and moved again, barely unpacking the last of our boxes before filling them with dishes and curtains once more. I couldn't keep even a window garden of herbs because planting seeds without any hope of staying put long enough for the

harvest is an exercise in futility. So now, finally trying again in a home we've owned for years, I find I've lost the skill.

Our friends Jonathan and Jessica own a brilliant design firm in Los Angeles. The first thing I always notice about their home is its indoor greenery. It's lush with ferns and succulents and Ficus trees.

"Don't ever plant a Ficus outdoors," Jonathan tells me. "Even if you

plant it in a highway median, these things are ferocious. Its roots can tear up asphalt." Their home feels alive, organic. I can practically taste the oxygen filtered through the ubiquitous leaves. The air feels fresher indoors than out. Whenever I visit, I want to stay forever. Jonathan and Jessica know how to tend to

**The new heavens
and the new earth
will be marked
by stability. No
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strange land.**

Chapter 1: Death to Ferns

tender greens; their attention doesn't waver after a day or two. I was sort of hoping some of their skill would rub off on me, but so far, no dice.

The book of Isaiah speaks of the hallmark of the coming Kingdom of God, that the new heavens and the new earth will be marked by stability. No longer will people live in exile, strangers in a strange land. Instead they will sow and reap, plant and harvest, enjoying the fruits of their labors. Writes Isaiah:

*They will build houses and dwell in them;
they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
No longer will they build houses and others live in them,
or plant and others eat.
For as the days of a tree,
so will be the days of my people;
my chosen ones will long enjoy
the work of their hands.⁴*

This blessing will be a sign of God's triumph over death and evil, a mark of final victory. This is our dream, our hope, our anticipated reality in the kingdom to come. At the end, when all is said and done, our reward is restful presence in a beautiful, stable place, rooted in peace with God and our neighbors. Yet tastes of this blessing are also offered to us right now, today, albeit in less polished form.

We are invited to partake of the blessing of stability.

This blessing is a hard one to lay hold of in our hypermobile, ever-distracted culture. Many of us relocate often, or we travel for work, or we are constantly on the lookout for the next best

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opportunity, no matter where it might take us. Even if we don't leave our towns of residence, we keep our eyes open for a church with a better program, a school with richer arts offerings or a stronger soccer team, a new restaurant to check out rather than our old standby. Sure, that old standby might close without our business, but what's that to us? Like sharks, we must keep swimming, lest we die.

The transient nature of our current culture is illustrated in what's becoming a necessity in fire-ravaged California. Here we are encouraged by the local authorities to have a "go bag" at the ready stuffed with essential supplies. A few bottles of water, a first aid kit, any necessary medications. Those with tiny kids are reminded to pack diapers or formula. Don't forget some nonperishable food, a flashlight, a battery-powered radio—and extra batteries. Disaster could strike at any moment, so it's wise to be prepared. People living in places prone to hurricanes or flooding might keep a similar stash at the ready. Those living in war-torn areas likely maintain a mental inventory of what to grab if hiding or flight becomes necessary.

When smoke curls over the horizon, I check our stock of supplies in case we need to hit the road in a hurry. We evacuated once for nearly a week, piling into the car to take refuge at our friends' home an hour south, the kids thrilled for the adventure of it all, me just grateful to have air clean enough to breathe, Daryl taking church phone calls in Michelle and Kevin's backyard, surrounded by chickens and beehives.

When we went back home again, after the smoke had cleared and the firefighters worked their magic, we did laundry and

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aired out the house and repacked our go bags with things we discovered we'd missed—contact solution and toothbrushes, and a couple of travel games because bored children invite their own unique types of disaster. (“Look, mom! My seatbelt is so tangled up it doesn’t work anymore!”) We live ready to leave in haste.

This shapes us, body, mind, and spirit. To exist perched on the edge of our metaphorical seats, ready to run, to spring into action, to go, go, go, is profoundly unsettling. Though there are dozens of biblical stories of God calling people far afield—Abraham and Moses, Miriam and Esther, Peter and Barnabas and Paul—there are just as many stories of staying put. But these are rarely as glamorous.

Take Anna, the prophetess from Luke 2, for example. After seven brief years of marriage, she is widowed. For the entire rest of her life—decades—she goes to the Temple to fast and pray. We aren’t told her hopes or dreams, but surely many of them were shattered in her husband’s death.

Without status or family, she goes to the only place she knows she will always be welcomed: into the house of God. She spends her days quietly, faithfully attentive to the Lord. On the surface, there is nothing to this story: no plot, no conflict, no thread. Just simple, repeated faithfulness. Sacred dependence. Holy obedience.

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Until the day half a century later when Anna holds in her arms the salvation of the world. The blessing of stability.

God may call each of us to go and do and leave and travel. Daryl and I have these stories ourselves—clear leading from God, miles beneath our wheels, lessons learned. But God calls us most often to be *still*, knowing and trusting in the divine presence here and now. Quietly, faithfully working in the small, mundane, sacred ordinary right here. Right now. This is a tough assignment when we feel such an inner drive to keep at least one eye on the shifting winds.

Transience threatens to dull our awareness of God, flattening our soul's attention to the more subtle signs of the Spirit. This is troubling because God tends to come to us in gentleness—a baby, born in a manger; a still, small voice; a divine nudge; a soft knock at the door. St. Teresa of Avila wrote of the necessity to cultivate spiritual attention, a quieting of the heart and mind in order to discern the voice and love of God. For her, God's presence unfolded slowly, a journey into the heart of a castle with many rooms, many distractions, many twists and turns. But at the divine center: glory. How much truer do her words ring on this side of the digital age!

Ready to Stay

Before kids, Daryl and I once spent a few nights a week crashing at a friend's home to save us the two-hour commute to and from our unpaid internship. The friend worked long hours, so we didn't see much of him. Exhausted from our long days, we ate a lot of prepackaged smoothies and take-out pizza, but

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occasionally we'd cook something. It proved tricky in a kitchen still filled with boxes.

"Is he moving?" I asked Daryl.

"He's been here for years," he said, "but I don't think he's decided whether he's going to stay."

This friend lived ready to leave, uncertain about his next steps. I've lived this way myself. Perhaps you have, too. Perhaps you are right there today.

It's tough to grow if we are ready to leave at any moment. Like a plant torn from the soil too many times, shallow roots stunt spiritual health, longevity, and maturity. Will we work through conflict with a friend or a neighbor if we're about to move away? Nah, we'll be gone soon anyway. Should we invest in caring for our home? Probably not, if we won't be living in it for long. Will we plant herbs or vegetables or flowers? Not if we won't be here for the harvest. In the short term, transience looks as though it will solve a host of problems, but if we dig a little deeper, it becomes clear that it tends to cause far more issues than it resolves, and that these are often much bigger.

In his book *Endurance*, Alfred Lansing chronicles Ernest Shackleton's ill-fated attempt to reach the South Pole. Though they faced some bumps at the start of the expedition, outlooks remained sunny. Notes Lansing, "Underlying the optimism and good spirits of the party was a deep-seated confidence that their situation was only temporary."⁵ However, their journey, scheduled to take only short months in reasonable weather, ended up taking far longer in devastatingly terrible conditions.

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Shackleton soon realized that simmering conflicts between crew members that could have been smoothed over with better sailing and a shorter-term expedition would need dealing with—and fast. He dove into the hard work of making peace—or at least a ceasefire between two of his more cantankerous and volatile crew members—and it is his leadership that the team credited with the entire crew’s ultimate survival against nearly impossible odds.

Of course, stability is not always our choice to make. Some of us serve companies that require travel or relocation without giving us much say. Sometimes duty to family in a time of need

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requires uprooting. The call of God may ask us to serve in a new place. Plus, there’s the hard truth that we increasingly live in a world of refugees and immigrants, unsafe homes and homelands. This book is not a treatise on why any of the reasons we might need to get up and go are bad or wrong or ill-advised. Instead, it is a call to be fully present where we are, right now. If that place can be cultivated

for the long term, all the better; but if it truly cannot, then living well in the moments we have where we are is a profoundly worthwhile practice. Let us *be here now*, present in the present to the present.

An Ancient Practice

A few years ago, pastor and professor Dennis Okholm delivered a guest sermon at our church on the spiritual discipline of stability. I'd never heard of such a thing. In all my years of churchgoing I'd listened to dozens of sermons about following God wherever he leads—even to the ends of the earth! I'd heard missionaries tell adventurous tales of leaving home and hearth behind. I'd searched the Scriptures myself and found inspiration for my own seminary journey in the story of Isaiah—"Here I am, send me!"—and in moving to California in the story of Abraham, leaving the familiar behind. No one had ever spoken from the pulpit about the blessing of stability and God's call to some or even most of us to remain right where we are planted and work to be faithful right here. I left Sunday worship excited to learn more.

It turns out there's a long-standing Christian tradition beginning with the monastics in the second and third centuries that's centered around the simple practice of staying put. For some, this meant a cloistered life dedicated to God within the confines of a monastery. Notes Rich Villodas, "Monks who enter a monastery take a vow of stability that grounds them in certain places for life." Even then, among men of such holiness, there were petty grievances and near-daily frustrations. People, after all, are always people. Yet "in a commitment to stability, we withstand the disturbances and annoyances of others for the sake of union with God and union with each other."⁶ Other monastics would dedicate just a season or a number of years to one particular place and group of people. For all, it meant acquiescing to the challenges and embracing the blessings of

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remaining present wherever God had placed them, even with the monotonies, irritations, and constraints a particular place invariably entails.

I wanted to learn more about this whole idea. I *needed* to learn more about it. If Daryl and I were indeed to stay put in our current location with our little family, we would need to embrace a whole new skill set. After years of hypermobility in a culture that celebrates hypermobility, we wanted to drink deeply from the well of stability's blessings. Yet if I couldn't keep a houseplant alive on the windowsill, even the succulent that Jonathan promised me was *very difficult* to murder, I wondered if there was any hope for me at all.

So I began where I always do when I'm fresh out of hope.

I went to the Scriptures.

Coming Home

The ultimate call to each one of us in Scripture is to come home. Home is where God is, a place of safety and presence, feast and blessing and rest. When we think of home, those of us with positive, nostalgic childhoods may remember gathering around a table for meals, the warmth of an embrace, a feeling of acceptance or happiness or peace. Those of us with rockier upbringings may find within ourselves a sense of loss and longing—we know what home *should* have been or *could* have been, and we yearn for that simple, joyful safety, love, and rest.

God promises us a home with him where every tear will be wiped away, shattered souls and lives will be made whole,


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and God himself will live among us—we as his people, God as our God. The book of Revelation paints a picture of a people at rest, enjoying rich feasts, at peace with God, one another, and themselves.⁷ This is the fulfillment we long for, the pinnacle of our salvation. As Sally Lloyd-Jones puts it in her *Jesus Storybook Bible*, because of Jesus “the sad things come untrue.”⁸ We hope and look and long for this perfection, this consummation.

But we must not stop here. The Christian life is not solely about hoping, longing, and waiting for eternity. Followers of Jesus have gotten themselves—and entire systems and societies—in heaps of trouble by promoting eternal salvation without a mention of

earthly good. If our hope is *only* in this eternal reality and has nothing to say to the injustices, sufferings, and disorders of our time, we would be better off in medically induced comas until glory. Instead, Scripture paints a profound and compelling picture of the age to come, while *also* calling us to work for the kingdom here and now. Future blessing must not lull us into complacency while we wait. There is work—good work, sacred work—to be done. And much of this work centers around stability.

Scripture offers three beautiful metaphors for the stability into which God invites us: cisterns (or wells), houses, and vineyards. We will take each one in turn.



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Questions for the Present

1

How many times in your life have you moved?
Which time was easiest? Hardest?

2

What is one problem moving away might solve?
What is one problem it might create?

3

What does Courtney mean by “the blessing of stability”? How does God meet us in stillness?

4

Read Isaiah 65:20–24. How is stability presented as a future hope? Which part feels most alluring to you?

5

What is your greatest challenge in seeking stability right now?