

Why I stay: A prayer

Because my yearning comes from somewhere, and that somewhere must be you.

by [Debie Thomas](#) in the [July 5, 2017](#) issue

I stay because A was for Adam, B for Bethlehem, and C for Cross, and my first classroom was a pew. Because I played hide-and-seek in the font when the preacher wasn't looking, answered every altar call with a sprint down the aisle, and snuck the leftover communion juice from the glasses the church ladies washed on Mondays. I was hoping—I understand this now—to steal a drop more of you.

Because decades later I'm still felled by stained glass; by musty old Bibles in empty, patient sanctuaries; by altar cloths, choir robes, and candle wax. Because my breathing slows in your house, my muscles unclench, and I remember how to sing loud and clear. Because you are my rootedness, my air, my water. The dark and frozen ground in which I wait to crack open, die, and sprout. You are the closest I ever come to flourishing.

Because I love stories, and I cherish the ones I first learned in your book. Because I am Eve and the apple makes sense to me. I'm Rachel and I won't surrender my sacred objects. I'm Leah and I long to be loved. I'm Hagar, and I will name you in the desert. I'm Miriam and I am ever watchful. I'm the bleeding woman and I need the hem of your robe. I'm Mary Magdalene and I must bear witness by your tomb. I'm Junia and my story aches to be told.

Because childhood ends but childhood hungers do not. Because you were my first house, first father, first mother, first love, first hate, first heartbreak, first safety, first terror.

Because the psalmist got it right: I was cast on you from birth. Because Peter got it even better: Lord, if I left, to whom would I go?

Because I like questions, and it turns out that you ask good ones. Because I answer when you ask, and my answers never shock you.

Why are you so afraid? (Are you kidding me?)

Do you still not understand? (Nope, not even a little bit.)

What do you want me to do for you? (Um, how much time do we have?)

Do you want to get well? (Occasionally.)

Do you love me? (I think so. Or, I want to. Or, not yet. Or . . .)

How long shall I put up with you? (A little longer, please.)

I stay because sorrow came too many times this year, and there had better be an afterward to explain it. I stood at gravesides and raged, my body betrayed me to panic, and my children knew fear and pain. Bodies failed, minds cracked, and we didn't live happily ever.

I stay because all in all there are far too many unfinished stories, and I'd like to believe you're neater than that. Because I yearn for so much more than I have. Because my yearning comes from somewhere, and that somewhere must be you. Because "on earth as it is in heaven" is all I've got, and if it's not enough, then I am lost. Because "Death, where is thy sting?" is a mockery, but "Jesus wept" is not.

Because joy comes too, and it doesn't look anything like I think it should. Because you hound me, and I can't get rid of you. Because our pursuit of each other is exquisite in both directions—pleasure and pain. Because rarely—too rarely, but I'll take what I can get—the veil parts, the ground gives way, the skies open, and my hunger for you intensifies to the breaking point of communion. The hunger itself becomes you: incarnate, shining, present. I know you then in the liturgy, in the Word, in the broken bread and spilled wine. I press my palms against ancient redwood trees, and you are there. You awe me in the mountains and at the shifting edges of the ocean. I hear you in the stillness of the forest, in the cacophony of birdsong. I feel you in the solid embrace of the people I love—their hands your hands, their eyes your eyes, their voices soft echoes of yours.

And in those moments the possibility of you grows and grows until I am unhoused and undone, almost too alive for this world. Because you are my Everlasting Almost—almost here, almost certain, almost always, almost irrefutable. You are the tenuous edge I will live and die on. Because the almost of you—heartbreaking as it is—is sweeter than any guarantee I can find in this world.

Because you're not who I thought you were, so I must wait for revelation. Because the mystery of your strangeness is a lure that calls my name. Because I thought I needed to contain you, but a tiny deity won't bend my knee.

Because the path is winding, and you are a God worthy of perilous journeys. Because I need to wrestle, and you meet me at the river. Because this is no ordinary hunger, and your manna alone will suffice. Because you know the loneliness of the desert, and so do I. Because I will drown unless you part this water. Because the world is dark, but it shimmers at its edges.

Because I'm wild inside, and you are not a tame lion. Because you suffered, and only a suffering God can help. Because you spoke of joy, and I need to learn how to laugh.

Because I am wired to seek you, and I will not let you go. Because my ache for you is the heart of my aliveness.

Because I am still your stubborn child, and I insist on resurrection.

A version of this article first appeared at [Journey With Jesus](#) and is included in the July 5 print edition under the title "Why I stay." The online version was edited on June 19.