

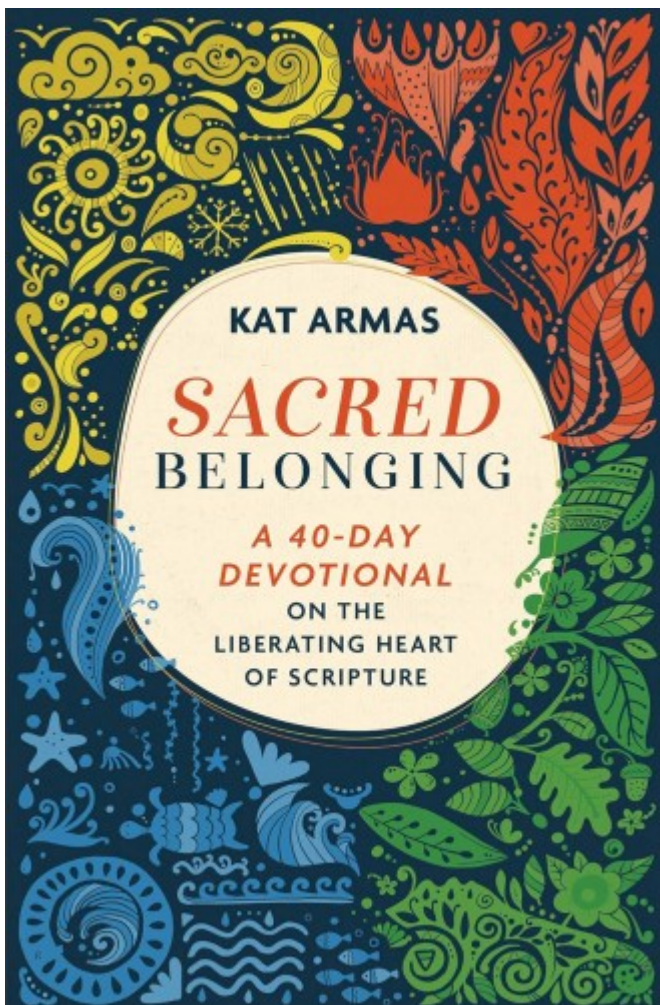
Kat Armas's devotional does not exist for your personal growth

Instead, the Cuban-American writer aims to turn her readers' gaze outward.

by [Elizabeth Felicetti](#) in the [May 2024](#) issue

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In Review



Sacred Belonging

A 40-Day Devotional on the Liberating Heart of Scripture

By Kat Armas

Brazos

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

“I haven’t read a devotional in years,” Kat Armas confesses in the first line of her new devotional book. I rarely finish a devotional, although I buy and start them regularly. Still, I devoured *Sacred Belonging* in a couple of days instead of taking the recommended 40.

Armas, who is Cuban-American, writes from a decolonizing perspective: “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 way of reading was aligned with Western imperialism, and so “the writings of subjected people resisting empire became the very texts used to justify it.” The title comes from Armas’s sense of belonging to a web larger than ourselves—a sense that she longs to cultivate in opposition to the pressure she feels from other devotionals to focus on herself and ways that she needs to change.

Armas, who has two seminary degrees, takes issue with the way “dominion over” (Gen. 1:26) has traditionally been interpreted. Noting that the word *over* suggests domination, she cites biblical scholar Ellen Davis’s argument that the preposition would be better translated as “among” or “with respect to.” This discussion takes place in my favorite section of the book, which focuses on the topic of creation. Throughout the section, Armas invites us to notice the creatures around us and listen to them—not merely as vessels God speaks through, but as subjects with their own agency and wisdom. The eight devotionals in this section clearly articulate Armas’s thesis that we are part of a sacred web of belonging.

In another section, focused on spirit, Armas expands on an idea introduced in her 2021 book *Abuelita Faith* that “confrontation is intimacy.” Here she offers examples from her own life, Jewish tradition, and Old Testament biblical stories (including Job). She compellingly writes about how the desire to avoid confrontation and questioning has led to clerical abuses by those who wield power dangerously. In the Bible, Armas notes, arguments with God are rooted in justice. She holds up Lamentations and the Psalms as models in which arguing with the Divine is a form of prayer.

One of my favorite chapters focuses on the book of Jonah. While sermons on Jonah often criticize his anger with God for sparing Nineveh, Armas has more sympathy for the prophet's quest for justice. She notes that Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, had conquered Israel and forced thousands into exile, and "a decolonized reading might remind us of the effects of colonial wounds and colonial trauma, which always have to do with the body." She also points out that God does not explicitly condemn Jonah for feeling angry. The question God poses to Jonah—"Is your anger a good thing?" (Jon. 4:4)—is never answered, Armas argues, so readers are invited to wrestle with the story. To help those who wrestle, she quotes Ruby Sales's distinction between two types of anger: non-redemptive anger, which destroys and exploits, and redemptive anger, which leads to building up and transformation.

In addition to Ruby Sales and Ellen Davis, Armas collects a multitude of fascinating conversation partners: Robin Wall Kimmerer, Wendell Berry, Howard Thurman, Amy-Jill Levine, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Julia Watts Belser, and too many others to list. The way she draws on their collective wisdom enhances the experience of reading this devotional.

The truth of Armas's assertion that she has not read a devotional in years is revealed in an inconsistency that she admits to in the book's introduction: some chapters include closing reflection questions, while others do not—although she often weaves questions into the text of the chapter (such as, "I wonder what our world would look like if we lived as if animals had souls?"). Where concluding reflection questions appear, they sometimes strike me as too broad to activate rumination in readers. Including reflection questions at the end of every chapter would have helped slow the book down a bit.

But that may not be Armas's goal. As she asserts in her introduction, this devotional is not meant to encourage readers to focus primarily on themselves. Since Armas's goal is to cultivate a larger sense of belonging, quibbling with questions may miss the point. As a devotional seeking to offer a different perspective for a whole web of beings rather than inspire personal change, this book does just what it aims to do.