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## **Deserts die at the oasis: Resisting resignation**

# **Accepting Invitations**

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Advent teaches us a great deal about the importance of preparation for desert sojourners. On this Sunday the focus shifts to the two-edged mystery of invitation. There is an underlying sense of expectation about God and his coming in the readings, the anticipation of the coming of the Messiah. However, where there is an anticipation of someone coming into our lives, there is also a challenge. Will we invite the one who is to come into our lives? Or, will we allow ourselves to be invited into God's life? The answer to these questions is neither self-evident nor automatic. We have all received invitations, to parties, birthday, anniversary, weddings and a host of other events. Our response to these invitations covers a wide spectrum: from joy to despair, from delight to resignation. Sometimes we want to accept, at other times we refuse to accept and at other times we wish we could refuse, but feel obliged to attend, which we then grudgingly do.

The expected reaction of believers to the expected coming of God is to extend an invitation to the one who is to come. Maranatha: Come, Lord Jesus! That is the side of Advent we tend to emphasize, extending an invitation to Christ. Yet, in the stories of God and the stories of faith, invitation is a mutual practice, in which God and his people move toward sharing the center of life with one another. The other side is underdeveloped in our spiritual practice, namely, learning to accept an invitation extended by the one who is to come. It is rather ironic that we neglect this side, because Christmas is nearly entirely composed of stories where we have to accept an invitation of God. Mary is invited by Gabriel to be the mother of the Lord.

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Shepherds are invited by angel choirs, Joseph is invited to relationship, relocation, return and protection in four dreams. The magi accept the invitation of a meandering star, and later take on an invitation of their God given dream to return home by another path. The Christmas story relentlessly drives home the point that although no one invited him, God showed up anyway. And the first thing that he does, is invite us join him. It is not until Simeon and Anna that we encounter two people who have generously, longingly and persistently been extending an invitation to God.

Invitations are wonderful things. They express our real desire for someone to come and stay with us, to be present to us. This desire is rooted in the fact that this person adds something to our lives, makes us experience greater fullness. Should the person be unable or unwilling to be present, we observe that something is missing. We are in some way incomplete.

Yet, an invitation is also a risk that we take. We enter into a new relationship and do not know where this will take us. Where will this lead? What changes will we have to make, what adjustments will be required in order to make the relationship possible? Perhaps this person will challenge us, move us to think anew of old realities. Sometimes the people we invite turn out to be far more complex and perplexing than we foresaw.

But everything I have said, also applies to God. The invitation of God expresses the real desire that we come and stay with him, to be present to him. We add something to his life and if we are unable or unwilling to be present, something is missing in the life of our God. His invitation to us is also accompanied by all the risks we know when we invite. Sometimes the people we invite turn out to be far more complex and perplexing than we foresaw.

Extending and accepting invitations is more difficult for us than for God, because we are frightened by the radicalism of encounter, while God cherishes it. How we prefer safe mediocrity to uncertain radicalism. One of the great images of that radicalism is the desert. It is a place where life is reduced to the bare bones basics. Stripped of every diversion, we are forced to deal with the radical (root) questions of life, faith, and relationship. The desert dies at oases, but not forever. There is always more desert. At the oases we are faced with the radical question of whether we accept the invitation to move towards the fullness of life, from one sign of hope to the next, from one oasis to the next, or whether we will settle for less than fullness and settle down at the oasis. It is the eternal temptation for us, to turn the temporary into the permanent, to turn the refreshing oases into our permanent residence.

Should we give into that temptation then why accept or extend an invitation from »one who is stronger than us« come? We already have what we need. Everywhere we turn we find that our lives are already filled. Our cash registers and pockets are full, our closets and homes are full, and our pocket calendars are full. Our heads are full of the latest news and fashion trends. Who needs Jesus? Is something really missing in our lives even if he should not come? Or have we not created our own fullness? Is there an authentic desire for someone greater than ourselves? Or are we not entirely satisfied with our narrow little world? Maybe it is time to ask the unthinkable question. Have we created our own salvation?

The radicalism of invitation relentlessly shakes us out of our complacency. There are no excuses, no escapes once we invite him into our lives, or once he invites us into his. Luke leads us to this Christ in his Gospel. He persuades us to take a good, hard look at the one who is to come. Jesus will not be impressed by money or wealth, not by what we possess, but by the charity we practise and by what we give. The Messiah will not be impressed by the cunning ability of the tax collectors who can climb the ladder of success, but by their willingness to be painstakingly honest in their dealing with others. Soldiers will not impress the Lord with their power and might, but by their readiness to serve the weak and be kind to the downtrodden.

Luke is a resolute teacher in his Gospel. Let there be no doubt that the encounter with Jesus makes our illusions of security and fulfilment disintegrate. Invitation is always linked to the realization of a certain emptiness. Faced with the longing for presence that is woven into every invitation, we might perceive the hollow, meaningless, and helpless shadows our lives truly

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are without that presence. Uneasy, restless and radically challenged, we suddenly are aware of the cost of encountering the Lord we invited so easily into our lives.

The call of Advent is to become a people of invitation. We could invite Jesus to come and tear down the walls of our narrow little world. Or we could accept his invitation to be a people who would rather hunger with great hopes than fill themselves with banalities. God's invitation to us, and ours to him, is the deep spiritual challenge not to settle for the cheap substitutes of power, prestige, pleasure and possessions. An Advent spirituality of invitation wants the real thing! A people of invitation await more than they can create for ourselves. Like God, our expectations go beyond our age and society and our immediate environment. Our hope, like God's, transcends the confines of our own need and embraces all times, all peoples, all places and all the world.

We cross the desert, because we are invited to a good, wide and fruitful land. We invite God to take every step of the journey with us. He invites us to stop at oases, and he invites us to move on to the next one. Invitation will always call us out, call us forward, to call us onward. It is the only way to counter resignation. Invitation shatters the power of hopelessness and unbelief that enfolds us by moving to the encounter in which we share the center of life with God, and God with us. But this encounter will always take place first at an oasis, not in the Promised Land. That is why the desert dies at oases, until this day.

**Erik Riechers SAC**

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