



Incarnation

Each month worship, religious education, community outreach ministry, covenant groups and Wellspring Wednesday programs will offer opportunities to contemplate, consider, contend with and discuss an intergenerational curriculum based on monthly themes. Our hope is that this approach will bind us more closely together and inform our lives in effective and positive ways. December's theme is... Incarnation

Come December, our upper Midwestern landscape turns brittle and bare. Summer's supple green fields are replaced by stalks standing rigid, a few stubborn seeds still dangling from dry stems. Milkweed pods, once pliant as wineskins, have hardened and cracked open, their brown matchtip seeds lined up with silken wings folded until the wind lifts them up and carries them away.

In this barren season of imminent winter and early nightfall, how is it that many religious traditions choose this time to focus our attention on *Incarnation*?

Incarnation names the mystery of spirit or soul residing in our embodied world, whether in its bare and dormant or more verdant, budding form. From the Latin *incarnatio*, meaning "in the flesh," it refers to the conception and birth of divinity in human form. First used theologically by 12th-century Christian leaders, *Incarnation* described the belief in Jesus' double status as both fully human and fully god.

Today, understood more broadly, it can also stand as an ardent challenge to the faulty dualism of body and soul. An incarnate theology refuses the notion that our bodies tragically imprison our souls; it suggests instead a different possibility more akin to ancient Taoist teachings that body and soul complete one another. "Every being in the universe," said Lao Tsu, "... springs into existence perfect, unconscious and free, takes on a physical body, and lets circumstances complete it."

In this panoptic view, the advent season anticipating the story of Jesus' birth, is one in which we wait and watch for the holy presence of life itself as it emerges not imprisoned but fully embodied in us and in the world around us. It does

not always appear where we might have expected it – under the king's crown or the enforcement of his soldiers, in the comfort of the inn, or in the privilege of the wealthy or the wise. No. The story of Jesus' birth reminds us that the holy is incarnate everywhere and in everyone, especially wherever our eyes may have moved on too quickly – in the unwed mother and the unplanned child, in the homeless traveler, in the bed of straw and the animals gathered round it.

Other personal and contemporary stories have deepened my understanding of *Incarnation* over the years. Friends waiting as adoptive parents to be united with a new child born far away have taught me that our most important preparations are not always for the birth of new life. Sometimes, more powerfully and proleptically, we wait and prepare for the birth of new relationship with life already present in this world.

I think of an experiment Darwin once conducted, in February taking three tablespoons of mud from the bottom of a pond, a sampling no larger than my palm and weighing all of 6¾ ounces. For six months, Darwin kept this cup of mud covered in his study, watching as new sprouts emerged. He pulled each one as it appeared, identifying it and counting it, and when the half-year experiment was completed, 537 plants of many different kinds had grown from those three tablespoons of common mud.

We often do not see it, but the world is teeming with life, with possibilities waiting for the right season and the right conditions to emerge. Known by many names, soul and spirit move within us and around us all the time. Even and perhaps especially, in this brittle, barren month of December, the focus

on *Incarnation* invites us to celebrate the seeds of life and spirit and relationship planted within us all.

Near the end of his life Thoreau wrote, "We find ourselves in a world that is already planted but is also still being planted as at first."

Come December, we remember the birth of holy promise – of life and of relationship – planted long ago and still being planted as at first. Let the winds of winter come, lifting up the seeds in waiting.

— Karen Hering,
Consulting Literary Minister

Worship Theme Resources

BOOKS

The Body of God by Sallie McFague

The Barn at the End of the World: the Apprenticeship of a Quaker, Buddhist Shepherd by Mary Rose O'Reilly

The Eros of Everyday Life by Susan Griffin

FILMS

Starman (1984) NASA sent Voyager II into outer space with an invitation to whomever might receive it... "Come and visit us." When someone did, we weren't ready. The alien incarnated, assumed the identity of a dead house painter and it tooled around the countryside in a hopped-up, 1977 Mustang. How do we open to the possibility of encountering one who is truly different from us? Jeff Bridges and Karen Allen star in a retro-80s almost classic.

Turn to page 5 for more movie titles.