



Chalice Circle Packet

December 2021

Incarnation



Photo by [Gursharndeeep Singh](#) on [Pexels](#)

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Unity Church-Unitarian, St. Paul, Minnesota

Unityunitarian.org

Incarnation

Incarnation names the mystery of spirit or soul residing in our embodied or material world. 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. “The Word became flesh,” the gospel of John declares, describing Jesus. Which, in one translation of the Greek word *logos* (the word), might be understood to mean Jesus was God’s full message or expression in the world: sacred spirit made visible by his humanity.

Understood more broadly, incarnation challenges the faulty dualism of body and soul, a dualism as present in parts of Unitarian Universalism as elsewhere. An incarnate theology refuses the notion that our bodies tragically imprison our souls or that either body or soul is more virtuous or sacred than the other. It suggests instead a relational wholeness 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 watch for the holy presence of life itself as it emerges not imprisoned but fully expressed in every one of us and in the world around us. Significantly, 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, the animals gathered round it, and the roaming shepherds giving witness to its miracle.

Other personal and contemporary stories have deepened my understanding in particular of advent’s *incarnation*. For instance, friends waiting as adoptive parents to be united with a new child born far away have taught me that many important preparations may not be for the birth of new life. Sometimes, more powerfully and proleptically, we wait and prepare for the birth of new relationship with life already in this world, experiencing incarnation that arises not just within us but between us.

The pandemic, too, has much to teach us about incarnation and embodied wholeness – about the sacred but messy and vulnerable nature of being bodies in a world where the blood and breath we need to live can also carry illness, even death. How to hold these seeming contradictions together? How to recognize the sacred gift delivered in the losses of our time? How to open ourselves to the miracle of relationship being born today, beneath our masks, across safe distancing, despite deep differences in faith, in immunity, in privilege, in place?

It is no accident that we focus on incarnation now – as the nights grow long in Minnesota’s northern clime and the pandemic’s persistent suffering wears our patience thin. Now, as dry husks rattle in the fields and in December winds, the mystery of spirit animating the dormant natural world keeps despair from taking hold. Beneath the hardened ground, within the bare-

branched trees, life remains and rests and waits. Neither spirit nor embodiment can reign alone. The world is made of both. And we, as people of faith and wholeness, are called to hold them together in our hearts, in our relationships and communities, awaiting another turn of earth and season and a new tilt of sunlight that, in time, will beckon life forth again.

By Karen Hering on behalf of this month's theme team: Ahmed Anzaldúa, Drew Danielson, Tom Duke, Ray Himmeyer, KP Hong, Kathy Hurt, and Laura Park (including portions from an earlier CommUNITY reflection by Karen Hering).

Spiritual Practices

Option A Body Prayer

In many practices of prayer or meditation, movements or positions of the body offer an important way to quiet the mind, to access the deep knowledge of the body, and to awaken spiritual understanding or awareness.

This month, try a body prayer practice you have not used regularly before and try to do it daily for a week or two before your circle meets. Several examples are offered below. Or you might choose another body prayer that you've learned elsewhere but haven't engaged daily before.

Each time you practice the movements, pause before you start and at the end to notice your body, scanning it for places of warmth or cold, relaxation or tension, energy or stillness. Without judging, just notice what you feel and whether it's the same or different from day to day. Then, as the week goes on and your movements become more habitual, notice what it's like to let your body lead without "thinking" your way through the prayer.

- **UU Body Prayer**

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/prayer/body-prayer-version-one>

- **Tai Ji Winter Mudra**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JUQoj5HwUhU>

- **Julian of Norwich Body Prayer**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7iImZilFvOE>

Come prepared to discuss with the group your experiences of embodied prayer.

Option B

The Gift of Limits

Everyone's body has its limits – in endurance, flexibility and lifespan. Incarnation is, in part, about honoring our mortality and our limitations, and recognizing our limitations are as sacred as our strengths and abilities. As many have noted, the pandemic itself has invited all of us to discover the gift of doing less. Of honoring limits. Of experiencing stillness.

In the December holiday season, many of us are stretched (and stressed) to capacity as we try to fit more tasks and activities into our lives as part of our holiday celebrations. For some, the stress of baking and entertaining, of sending holiday cards and preparing or purchasing gifts can overwhelm the messages about Peace and Joy.

This practice invites you to honor the limitations of time and energy that are naturally a part of the material, embodied world. In addition to the "To-do" lists you might already have for this busy time of year, consider what a "Not-To-Do" list might look like. Write out your "Not-To-Do" list and consider how the things on this list might be keeping you so occupied you miss the spirit of the season.¹

After writing out your "Not-to-Do" list, practice not doing the things you put on it (or at least one of them, if you need to start small). How does that feel? Is it difficult or easy? What emotions arise from not doing these things? What are the consequences of not doing them? What is made possible by it? What changes, inside you and around you, because you have not done something on the list? What do you learn about keeping busy, about time, about limits? Does it affect the connection between your body and your spirit? Does it affect your openness to the holiness of the here and now?

Come to your circle prepared to share about your experience.

¹ Adapted from "Family and Advent Spiritual Practices."

Option C

Body Scan

It can be surprising to notice the many ways our dominant Western culture teaches us not to pay attention to our bodies. Not to listen to the body's wisdom or pain, its desires or needs. Not surprisingly, healing – of any kind – often begins by restoring the body's ability to feel, both physically and emotionally. This is true not only individually but also collectively. To heal the brokenness in our relationships, our communities and our world, we need to be aware of our very real pain as well as our desire for joy and love and well being.

Many meditation teachers offer a guided practice of scanning the body to notice each part of it and to compassionately tune in to what it is feeling.

For this practice, choose one of the guided body scan meditations below or find one of your liking online. (There are many!) Try to do it at least 3 times a week for a week or two, and notice its effect on your awareness of your body and your feelings. Are there parts of your body that have less feeling or awareness than others? Are there parts that carry more tension or joy? Are there parts that hold more pain or more energy? Are there parts of your body that you find difficult to love? If so, why? What do you learn about your body and from your body in this scan? Where is it most connected to your spirit?

Tara Brach's 11-minute body scan

<https://www.tarabrach.com/guided-meditation-body-scan-living-presence-11-min/>

Jon Kabat Zinn's body scan exercise

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15q-N-kkrU>

Come to your circle prepared to share what your experience has been and what you've learned from it.

Questions to Ponder

Read through the questions below and notice which ones resonate with you. One or more of the questions might seem particularly compelling – or some might stir resistance in you. Either of these reactions might make the question fruitful to consider. Choose just one and take time to consider it, over several days if possible. Write it down on a piece of paper you carry in your pocket. Or take a picture of that paper with your phone. Or record it in your journal—and spend some time, each day if you can, reflecting on it in writing or otherwise, noticing where it leads you and what you learn from it and your response to it.

1. Are your mind, spirit, and body separate and dependent, or aspects of the same integrated being? Is there tension between them?
2. How has your understanding and awareness of your body changed over time? What has caused those changes? Has that changed the connection between your body and your spirit?
3. When do you feel the least separation between your spirit and your body? Do you have practices that invite this integration?
4. Have you noticed particular experiences or situations that increase the separation of your body and spirit? What does it feel like when that happens and what is your response?
5. Is the Christian story of God incarnate as Jesus important to you? How does it inform your faith and your relationship to your body, your spirit, and to others?
6. What message does a theology of incarnation offer regarding the oppression of black or brown bodies or women's bodies or bodies with disabilities?
7. What makes a theology of incarnation challenging for you? What makes it healing? How does or does it not play a strong role in your faith?
8. Are there times you have felt "at one" in your body and spirit? Times you felt an opposition? Have you ever felt betrayed by your body?
9. What does it mean to you to say we human beings are "created in the image of God?"
10. When Madeline L'Engle says "There is nothing so secular that it cannot be sacred," do you agree? Can you name anything that it wouldn't encompass? How is this related to Jesus' life and teachings, noting that Engle went on to say, "and that is one of the deepest messages of the Incarnation."?
11. **What is your question?** As always, if the above questions don't name what life is asking from you now, spend the month listening to your heart to hear what your question is.

Resources

Recommended Resources for Personal Exploration & Reflection

The following resources are not required reading. They will not be analyzed in our circles. Instead, they are here to companion you on your journey this month, get your thinking started and open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to develop a spiritual practice of curiosity.

Word Definitions & Roots

Incarnation, noun

- 1 the act of incarnating: the state of being incarnate
- 2 a particular physical form or state: VERSION, for example, TV and movie incarnations of the story
- 3
 - a a concrete or actual form of a quality or concept, especially a person showing a trait or typical character to a marked degree, such as “she is the incarnation of goodness”
 - b (1) capitalized: the union of divinity with humanity in Jesus Christ
(2) the embodiment of a deity or spirit in some earthly form

Merriam-Webster Dictionary

Word Origin

1250–1300; Middle English from Late Latin incarnātiōn- [incarnate](#) + -iōn--[ion](#)

Wise Words

“Nature is the incarnation of a thought, and turns to a thought, again, as ice becomes water and gas. The world is mind precipitated, and the volatile essence is forever escaping again into the state of free thought. Hence the virtue and pungency of the influence on the mind of natural objects, whether inorganic or organized.”
~Ralph Waldo Emerson, excerpt from *Nature* (1844 essay).

“There is nothing so secular that it cannot be sacred, and that is one of the deepest messages of the Incarnation.”
~Madeleine L'Engle
[Goodreads \(https://bit.ly/3FWeU2F\)](https://bit.ly/3FWeU2F)

“This is the homely heart of Incarnation, this meeting of God in man with men and women, this simple face of divine graciousness in ordinary life rather than in the hymns of church fathers or in the dry elaborations of theologians.”
~Eugene Kennedy, *The Joy of Being Human*.

“Action is always superior to speech in the Gospels, which is why the Word became flesh and not newsprint.”
~Colin M. Morris, *Mankind My Church*

“All manner of thing shall be well/ When the tongues of flame are in-folded/ Into the crowned knot of fire/ And the fire and the rose are one.”

~T.S. Eliot, excerpt from *Little Gidding*

<https://bit.ly/3E1P9NO>

“What if brain is to mind as hand is to fist? Like, maybe the mind is something that the brain can make of itself, a posture it can hold. We have a lap when we sit down, but not when we stand—even though we always have legs. We always have a brain but only have a mind when we’re conscious or dreaming, and not when we’re in surgery or dead.”

~Dessa, *My Own Devices: True Stories from the Road on Music, Science, and Senseless Love*

“The simplest affirmation of the mystery of the Incarnation is the world itself.”

~Pat Marrin, excerpt from [Celebrating Science](#) article in *National Catholic Reporter*

<https://bit.ly/32lqwlj>

“Real presence is the heart of the incarnation and it is also the heart of the Eucharist. This is where imagination works so beautifully with the absence and emptiness of life. It always tries to find a shape of words or music or color or stone that will in some way incarnate new presence to fill the absence.”

~John O' Donahue, excerpt from [4 Keys to Experience Wonder](#) article in *Guideposts*

<https://bit.ly/3cUbuYe>

“If it's darkness we're having, let it be extravagant.”

~Jane Kenyon, excerpt from [Taking Down the Tree](#)

<https://bit.ly/3cVKUrc>

“If Black Lives Matter is the word, Ferguson is the word made flesh.”

~Rev. Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou

<http://www.revsekou.com/>

Poetry

For Calling the Spirit Back From Wandering the Earth in Its Human Feet

by Joy Harjo

Put down that bag of potato chips, that white bread, that can of pop.

Turn off that cell phone, computer, and remote control.

Open the door, then close it behind you.

Take a breath offered by friendly winds. They travel like the earth gathering essences of plants to clean.

Give it back with gratitude.

If you sing it will give your spirit lift to fly to the stars' ears and back.

Acknowledge this earth who has cared for you since you were a dream planting itself precisely within your parents' desire.

Let your moccasin feet take you to the encampment of the guardians who have known you before time, who will be there after time. They will sit before the fire that has been there without time.

Let the earth stabilize your postcolonial jitters.

Be respectful of the small insects, birds and animal people who accompany you.

Ask their forgiveness for the harm we humans have brought down upon them.

Don't worry.

The heart knows the way though there may be high-rises, interstates, checkpoints, armed soldiers, massacres, wars, and those who will despise you because they despise themselves.

The journey might take you a few hours, a day, a year, a few years, a hundred, a thousand or even more.

Watch your mind, without training it might run away and leave you your heart for the immense human feast set by thieves of time.

Do not hold regrets.

When you find your way to the circle, to the fire kept burning by the keepers of your soul, you will be welcomed.

You must clean yourself with cedar, sage, or other healing plant.

Cut the ties you have to failure and shame.

Let go the pain you are holding in your mind, your shoulders, your heart, all the way to your feet. Let go the pain of your ancestors to make way for those who are heading our direction.

Ask for forgiveness.

Call upon the help of those who love you. These helpers take many forms: animal, element, bird, angel, saint, stone, or ancestor.

Call your spirit back. It may be caught in corners and creases of shame, judgment, and human abuse.

You must call in a way that your spirit will want to return.

Speak to it as you would to a beloved child.

Welcome your spirit back from its wandering. It may return in pieces, in tatters. Gather them together. They will be happy to be found after being lost for so long.

Your spirit will need to sleep awhile after it is bathed and given clean clothes.

Now you can have a party. Invite everyone you know who loves and supports you. Keep room for those who have no place else to go.

Make a giveaway, and remember, keep the speeches short.

Then you must do this: help the next person find their way through the dark.

<https://poets.org/poem/calling-spirit-back-wandering-earth-its-human-feet>

Within the Shining of a Star

by Robert S. Lehman

Within the shining of a star
we catch a glimpse of who we are
in every infant born we see
the hope of our nativity.

Excerpt from *Singing the Living Tradition*
Unitarian Universalist hymnbook, Hymn 238

After Annunciation

by Madeleine L'Engle

This is the irrational season
when love blooms bright and wild.
Had Mary been filled with reason
there'd have been no room for the child.

From *A Cry Like a Bell: Poems*

<https://englewoodreview.org/poem-after-annunciation-madeleine-lengle/>

Prayer

Life Is An Advent Season

“Life is a constant Advent season: we are continually waiting to become, to discover, to complete, to fulfill. Hope, struggle, fear, expectation and fulfillment are all part of our Advent experience.

The world is not as just, not as loving, not as whole as we know it can and should be. But the coming of Christ and his presence among us—as one of us—give us reason to live in hope: that light will shatter the darkness, that we can be liberated from our fears and prejudices, that we are never alone or abandoned.

May this Advent season be a time for bringing hope, transformation and fulfillment into the Advent of our lives.”

[Life Is An Advent Season \(appleseeds.org\)](http://appleseeds.org)

Articles

The Next Incarnation

by Evan Osnos

As the Dalai Lama turns seventy-five, what is Tibet's future?

Excerpt: The current Dalai Lama was born to a family of farmers in northeastern Tibet. His mother bore sixteen children, seven of whom survived. His father was a horseman with a short temper. When the son was two years old, a search party was roaming the countryside looking for a toddler who might be the latest incarnation of the Dalai Lama. As the Dalai Lama wrote in a 1990 memoir, “Freedom in Exile,” the search party proceeded under the guidance of mystical signs: When the party reached the [family's] home, they monitored the boy for days and then tested him by laying out prayer beads, drums, and other objects and asking him to identify which ones had belonged to the previous Dalai Lama.

He chose correctly and was eventually whisked off to Lhasa...

Full article:

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/the-next-incarnation>

I Met God, She's Black

by Anita Little

“To some degree, Black Lives Matter is shifting that narrative because you have queer black women at the forefront that are really the voice of challenging authority and protecting black bodies. With this exhibition, I wanted a space for black

women to talk about how they value themselves against an environment that constantly attempts to dehumanize them and their contributions.”

Full Article: <https://religiondispatches.org/i-met-god-shes-black-an-exhibit-makes-the-black-female-body-a-temple/>

Embodied Spirituality: Maternal Reflections on the Intellectualization of Worship and the Embodied Leadership of People with Intellectual Disabilities

By Laura MacGregor

The Canadian Journal of Theology, Mental Health, and Disability

Abstract: The intellectualization of worship in many mainstream churches denies embodiment as a source of spiritual wisdom, and as a result excludes the meaningful participation and leadership of people with intellectual disabilities. Drawing on personal experience as the mother of a child with profound intellectual disabilities, this paper will explore how an intellectual lens of faith, as demonstrated by theologians such as Henri Nouwen and Hans Reinders, has colonized the embodied spiritual lives of people with intellectual disabilities. A refusal to explore embodiment as the foundation of a Divine relationship has meant that the spiritual lives of people with intellectual disabilities are often viewed as passive or childish.

Full article:

<https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/cjtmhd/article/view/35012/27522>

Crip Time, Sacred Time, and Holding History

by Caroline Lieffers and Chelsea Chamberlain

This article is a fascinating exploration of how “crip time” and bodies with disabilities create “sacred time.” It calls us to consider how concepts like time are embedded in our bodies, and what such concepts mean when we are in community with one another.

Excerpt: In 1910, two girls we will call by the pseudonyms Ethel and Anna were living at the Pennsylvania Training School for Feeble-Minded Children at Elwyn. The girls were thirteen and fourteen years old respectively, and they had very little control over their institutionalized lives. They were expected to perform unpaid labor, sometimes seven days a week, and disciplined if they failed to adhere to the institution’s strict schedule. Yet in this deeply dehumanizing environment, Ethel and Anna recognized and pursued each other’s humanity.

<https://politicaltheology.com/crip-time-sacred-time-and-holding-history/>

<https://www.inverse.com/mind-body/sensing-presence-of-gods-spirits-study>

Queering the Body

by Keegan Williams

A short personal reflection on embodying queerness through body modification.

Excerpt: Many documented body modifications from [centuries past](#) have adjacent purposes of how we see the practice utilized today—it was a way to show where you were from, to tell your story as an individual, the stories of your life. Obviously, all kinds of people embrace body modification today, but some of those

original intentions behind body modification marry themselves to queerness, as a way to visibly show the world, “Hey, I made this alteration to my body, and I’m better for being able to live in it.”

<https://www.outfrontmagazine.com/ofm-mods-queering-the-body/>

Podcasts

On Being

Krista Tippett interviews Bessel van der Kolk

From *On Being*: When Krista interviewed the psychiatrist and trauma specialist Bessel van der Kolk for the first time, his book *The Body Keeps the Score* was about to be published. She described him then as “an innovator in treating the effects of overwhelming experiences on people and society.” She catches up with him in 2021 — as we are living through one vast overwhelming experience after the other... His perspective is utterly unique and very practically helpful — on what’s been happening in our bodies and our brains, and how that relationship can become severed and restored.

<https://onbeing.org/programs/bessel-van-der-kolk-trauma-the-body-and-2021/#audio>

Transcript: <https://bit.ly/313OXj6>

Deeply Human

Spooked - Why you think there really is something out there.

From BBC News World Service:

Why, when you’re alone, do you sometimes feel like you’re not?

Eager to find signs of life in our surroundings? Eager enough to see faces in clouds, or tweak out when the house creaks at night?

Dessa investigates some of the most mystical, disorienting and disturbing experiences a person can have. She discovers that neuroscience, the study of our brains, might just help explain this big, important chunk of being human.

Podcast:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3ct2cbm>

Books

The Book of Awakening: Having the Life You Want by Being Present to the Life You Have

by Mark Nepo

“Philosopher-poet and cancer survivor, Mark Nepo opens a new season of freedom and joy--an escape from deadening, asleep-at-the-wheel sameness--that is both profound and clarifying. His spiritual daybook is a summons to reclaim aliveness, liberate the self, take each day one at a time, and to savor the beauty offered by life's unfolding.”

Goodreads: <https://bit.ly/3rn8Dce>

Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief

by Rick Riordan

This is book 1 in a series of novels, for children, about mythology-textbook Greek gods that become real. Percy Jackson and his demigod friends fight mythological monsters and the forces of Titan lord Kronos.

Goodreads:

<https://www.goodreads.com/series/40736-percy-jackson-and-the-olympians>

The Cost of Discipleship

by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

One of the most important theologians of the twentieth century illuminates the relationship between ourselves and the teachings of Jesus in this classic text on ethics, humanism, and civic duty.

What can the call to discipleship, the adherence to the word of Jesus, mean today to the businessman, the soldier, the laborer, or the aristocrat? What did Jesus mean to say to us? ...

The Cost of Discipleship is a compelling statement of the demands of sacrifice and ethical consistency from a man whose life and thought were exemplary articulations of a new type of leadership inspired by the Gospel, and imbued with the spirit of Christian humanism and a creative sense of civic duty.

Goodreads: <https://bit.ly/3D32aFE>

Movies

Oh, God!

Directed by Carl Reiner, 1977

When God appears to an assistant grocery manager as a good-natured old man, the Almighty selects him as his messenger for the modern world.

IMDb: <https://m.imdb.com/title/tt0076489/>

Won't You Be My Neighbor

Directed by Morgan Neville, 2018

A documentary that explores the life, lessons, and legacy of iconic children's television host Fred Rogers.

IMDb: <https://m.imdb.com/title/tt7681902/>

A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood

Directed by Marielle Heller, 2019

Based on the true story of a real-life friendship between Fred Rogers and journalist Lloyd Vogel.

IMDb: [A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood \(2019\) - IMDb](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9403508/)

5B

Directed by Paul Haggis and Dan Krauss

A documentary about the staff and patients of San Francisco General Hospital's AIDS ward during the early years of the epidemic.

IMDb: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9403508/>

Rain Man

Directed by Barry Levinson, 1988

After a selfish L.A. yuppie learns his estranged father left a fortune to an autistic savant brother in Ohio that he didn't know existed, he absconds with his brother and sets out across the country, hoping to gain a larger inheritance.

IMDb: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0095953/>

Music

Incarnation Spotify playlist

- *In The Flesh* – Blondie
- *Human Nature* – Michael Jackson
- *Body and Soul* – Jimmy Raney
- *Perfect* – One Direction
- *New Sensations* – Lou Reed
- *You Remain* – Willie Nelson and Bonnie Raitt
- *I'll Be Waiting* – Adele
- *Awaiting On You All* – George Harrison

Spotify: <https://spoti.fi/31aClGe>

TV/Video

An Evening with Mark Nepo

At All Saints Church, Pasadena CA

In a 2 ½ - minute excerpt from this reading video, Mark Nepo reads a passage from January 1, page 1 of his daybook, *The Book of Awakening: Having the Life You Want by Being Present to the Life You Have*, on a Buddhist story about the odds of being born in human form. Listen from minute 5:43 to minute 8:13.

YouTube: <https://youtu.be/9Hp8nn2hGyU?t=342>

Photographs

Cover photograph

Lighted Incandescent Bulb

by Gursharndeeep Singh on Pexels.

Photographer:

<https://www.pexels.com/@sharn07jot>

Pexels: <https://www.pexels.com/>