

I and I
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Genesis 1: 1-27; 31
Ecclesiastes 3: 15; 19-21
Psalm 96: 11-13

I've known for months that I would bring you a message this summer about reincarnation.

What I didn't know until a few weeks ago was how closely it would resonate with the other messages God has spoken through this congregation during the summer lay preaching season.

What I didn't know until just a couple of weeks ago was how it would be informed and shaped by a family trip to Montana.

What I didn't realize and process until just a few days ago was that it would be a Communion Sunday. God is still speaking indeed.

So, about reincarnation.

Merriam-Webster offers this somewhat recursive definition:

- 1a: the action of reincarnating : the state of being reincarnated
- b: rebirth in new bodies or forms of life
especially : a rebirth of a soul in a new human body
- 2: a fresh embodiment

The Merriam-Webster definition of incarnation is only slightly more illuminating:

- 1: the act of incarnating : the state of being incarnate
- 2: a particular physical form or state : VERSION
in another incarnation he might be a first vice-president — Walter Teller
TV and movie incarnations of the story
- 3a: a concrete or actual form of a quality or concept
especially : a person showing a trait or typical character to a marked degree
she is the incarnation of goodness
- b(1) capitalized : the union of divinity with humanity in Jesus Christ
- b(2): the embodiment of a deity or spirit in some earthly form

Rick and I flew to Montana on July 20th to participate in celebrating a nephew's wedding in West Glacier, just outside a western entrance to Glacier National Park, and to take the opportunity that presented to visit the park. Attending the wedding festivities; rafting on a river at low water level; day hiking among disappearing glaciers; visiting with mountain goats; dashing for shelter from a rain and hail squall; gazing at tightly folded and layered mountains casually shedding loose rock of varied colors and textures; moving through lush mountainside gardens and thickly grown valleys; crossing the continental divide. These and the rest of our experiences were explicitly incarnated. We our physical selves were immersed in the physical world in its joy and distress.

After the wedding Rick and Dillon and I spent 4 days backpacking in the park, traversing from the west side of the Rockies to the east side. It was glorious, even if this mortal coil huffed and truded most of the upslope trek in very unheroic form. At the conclusion of our hike, trail worn but reluctant to depart, we took a shuttle to the St. Mary's park entrance on the east side of the park. There we spent a few minutes in a small exhibit in the visitors' center documenting the life of the land before and since the creation of the park. In addition to the charismatic animals — bear, wolf, coyote, mountain lion, and others — the exhibit included excerpts from the perspectives and testimonials of the three nations displaced by US treaty, and subsequently barred from living, hunting, or

practicing their traditions in the park. In written quotes and in brief video segments, members of the Kootenai, the Pend d'Oreille, and the Blackfoot tribes spoke plainly and with deep conviction about the sacred connection they shared with the land, and how they have been severed from it. They spoke about the pain of being separated from the spirits of their ancestors residing in the mountains and forests. They testified to the spirit of the water that has its own life, and gives life to all. I wept helplessly the entire time, overcome by grief and gratitude.

Grief, for generations of genocide and continuing harm done to these and other Native and Indigenous peoples in the name of government, corporate, and individual — yes, and even church — interests. Like the Israelites in Babylonian captivity, they are living in exile from their homeland, from their sacred spaces, from their ancestral ties and traditions. And they are we: they are our siblings. Their ancestors are our ancestors. Both the aggressors and the victims are our family.

Gratitude because the Going-to-the-Sun Road and the trails we had just hiked are physical scars on the land attesting to that history of forced removal and exploitation; preserved as the beautifully, even lovingly tended means by which we had experienced this sacred place.

Incarnation and reincarnation.

As we are reminded this morning in Carol's beautiful reading, God created all that is from nothing. It's hard to even conceive of *nothing*, let alone God existing when there was nothing. That's a brain twister. The Genesis stories tell us that humankind were created out of the dust, from the other matter that God had already created. So we are not above or separate from or superior to any part of creation, contrary to millennia of religious and secular ideology. We are derived from it. From dust we came and to dust we return.

Dust is nothing to be ashamed of. God declared all of creation good. Everything that is bears God's imprint. Maybe God even created all that is out of God's own self. God dust is none too shabby. Certainly it was good enough for Jesus — The Incarnation — to inhabit and share with us.

From another perspective, science — disciplined inquiry into understanding the workings of the universe — has taught us that existing matter and energy are conserved, that neither can be destroyed nor created. Begging the physicists among us to please forgive my oversimplification, we have quite recently learned that matter is mostly energy, and may be a form or expression or incarnation of energy. Further, we don't know how to perceive or comprehend ~90% of matter and energy in the known universe. In other words the composition of our observable universe — not to mention the nature of life and consciousness — is still largely a mystery.

So then although we know that in the proverbial circle of life, birth, death, new birth, our bodies — our physical incarnations — are recycled along with all other matter, what about our spirits? Are they a form of energy? Is the stuff of souls conserved? Or does it obey other laws?

The philosopher in Ecclesiastes finds this line of inquiry — like all else — a topic for despair, or at least apathy: if humanity isn't above all that, then what's the point? But I think in his ennui he lost the thread. What if being of the dust, derived from and endlessly recycled in the rest of creation, is the most telling aspect of our human identity? Humans came last and are part of all.

Does it matter if we are reincarnated as ourselves in new human bodies, or in other animal bodies, or in plant, mineral, or water forms? What would it be like to live as a stone, or a mountain, with millions of years of geologic drama? Or as a river, shifting course over millennia? Or an aspen grove or mycelium network, reaching across acres? What if they are our ancestors, siblings, future selves?

Or does it matter if our individual identities persist — whether the notion of self is just another attribute of a particular incarnation, and as we are reincarnated our portion of soul stuff mixes with other soul stuff, taking on and experiencing totally different selves as it takes on and experiences different material forms?

One of the visitor information signs in Glacier National Park notes that the Kootenai believe life has little value without true regard for the integrity of the environment. That strikes me as a deep conviction about the centrality of community to the nature of existence: we live in community not only with all other humans — difficult enough for me and many of us to accept and practice — but with all of God’s realm. We live in indivisible community with all of creation. All that currently is, around and within us. All that ever was. All that will be. There is no *us* and *them*. There is only *we*, recycled, reconstituted, reincarnated down through eternity.

In our highly anthropocentric lives, it’s easy to subscribe to the illusion that we are apart from, rather than a part of, the world we inhabit. This is nothing new, as we hear in Ecclesiastes. Humanity’s other defining characteristic may be this impulse to separate ourselves from each other, from God, from the rest of creation. We deploy this conceit both consciously and unconsciously to justify unconscionable harms, or sins, in Biblical language.

Capitalism necessitated the useful legal fiction that corporations are persons, thereby entitled to certain rights and treatment under the law. Too often this useful fiction has been weaponized to privilege corporations over actual persons, and over the natural world. This was turned on its head when, utilizing similar legal reasoning, in 2017 the Whanganui River was recognized as a legal person by the New Zealand government. The news was met with derision by many commentators, ridiculed as silly or worse. But why shouldn’t a river have a greater inherent claim to be recognized than a company? Could this be a small step for modern Western civilization to return to the ancient understanding that creation is sacred and imbued with its own rights?

The title of this sermon may be a familiar expression to many of you, but maybe not all. Quoting Wikipedia, “The phrase ‘I and I’ comes from the Rastafari vocabulary and refers to the ‘oneness’ between God and humans. According to Rastafarian scholar E.E. Cashmore, ‘I and I is an expression to totalize the concept of oneness, the oneness of two persons. So God is within all of us and we’re one people in fact. I and I means that God is in all [humans].’”

If we are one, and if we bear the spirit of God the creator, then we are also inescapably, inextricably one with all other matter, all other life.

In this roundabout meditation, I offer you a reflection from another facet of this summer’s running theme: there is nothing that is apart from God, or separate from God’s creation. God is in all things, and all things are in us, and we are in all things, and all is in an endless swirl of divine creation playing out through billions of years of incarnation and reincarnation.

Jesus tells us to love one another as ourselves — because we are all ourselves. There is no one else. Jesus also said if we forgive or release the sins of others, they are released, and if we retain the sins of others, they are retained. That is not only an outward gesture, a declaration toward the other, but an act of healing our community, ourselves. Repentance. Grace. How do we go about releasing the sins of our forefathers and foremothers who have committed grave and grievous sins, and our own generation for its atrocities, and our own selves for our direct and indirect complicity? How do we repent and release past and current generations of our sins? How does that participation in grace change us, and how, by its embodiment in us, does that grace shape the incarnations of future generations? Paraphrasing the Indigo Girls, how do we let all of our lives — past, present, and future — off the hook? How does that grace bless all of our nonhuman incarnations? How does it work to heal this scarred and suffering earth? Maybe this is precisely the transformation in process through the resurrected life of Christ. Only God knows. But God has told us and shown us again and again that love is the medium.

Across Christian and other traditions, transcendent or mystical experiences are often marked by a suffusing and lasting sense of universal belonging, divine welcome, oneness, connection. This morning’s fragment from Psalm 96 is one of many Scripture passages referring to the animal and plant kingdoms and even what we think of as inanimate objects praising God, being known by God, serving as models for how we, the last to be created, are to accept and return God’s loving embrace.

One perfect morning when Rick and I were on a day hike in Glacier, we paused to soak in the vista. [We did that a lot, and it may be impossible to do it enough.] I sat on a flat rock next to the path, and tried to breathe in the view

near and far. A pika whose territory I had just invaded continued about its business around me, unconcerned. It found and ate seeds, sniffed at many plants, and attended to whatever else interested it. After a time, it came up to me quite calmly, stood on its hind legs, and patted my knee ever so gently. Then it went on its way with no further comment. Maybe not exactly transcendent or mystical, but that fleeting sensation was one of the most memorable of my many memorable experiences of the Park, because in that instant I felt welcomed, connected, blessed by my small wild other self — I and I. That unexpected gift of grace is now a part of me in this incarnation. I pray the pika was blessed by its tender act of hospitality as well.

The Psalmist didn't only use lyrical simile for poetic effect: we are animal and rock and plant and insect and microbe and galaxy and water and energy; particle and wave — and string (?). *Our days are like grass* because we and grass are the same stuff. *As the flower of the field, so we flourish* because we share in the same circle of life. *When the wind has passed over it it is no more, and its place knows it no longer*, but it is / we are recycled and reincarnated into new life in ways we do not understand and often fail to recognize. *But the love of the Lord endures forever*, incarnated in everyone and everything.

Such as I have been given, I give to you. Go lightly and be filled with grace. Recognize your place in God's creation, and its place in you. We are neither hegemony nor neighbors nor even relatives to the world around us, but correspondent articulations of the same life God set in miraculously inexhaustible, kaleidoscopic motion at the origin of time.

And so let us embrace I AM in ourselves and in all creation, especially as we partake in this Communion together, and let us together be I and I, God's love incarnate.

Amen.