

DO YOU HAVE A SOUL?

Psalm 148: 1-13

Do you have a soul? Do we humans have souls by virtue of being human? What about the earth and all creatures? Do they have souls? Growing up I was taught that we humans have souls and only we humans have souls. I was also taught that the soul is that part of us that the dictionary definition calls “immaterial” or non-physical, a part of us that is immortal, unlike our bodies and brains which decay and die over time. Therefore, we human souls can rise up and go to heaven while other life on earth just lives and dies like our bodies do.

I don't believe this anymore. Through learning I've discovered that the idea of a soul separate from a body and a part of us that is immortal is a western idea, and many peoples in other parts of the world have not believed such a thing. Yes we are souls, but we are embodied souls. Even as our physical bodies decay and die there is a part of our embodiedness that is who we are and always will be in some way. We don't have to understand it all to believe it. The apostle Paul refers to our spiritual bodies that follow our physical bodies and are part of the resurrection after death. Also, the idea that only human beings have souls is not only a western idea, but a very modern idea that has nothing to do with what the bible actually teaches.

OK preacher, even if there's truth in what you say, why does it matter? It matters because how we relate to other life on this planet, and even how we relate to ourselves and our bodies depends on ideas that become beliefs and then shape our attitudes and behaviours toward ourselves and others. The relationships we form with all life on this planet and all physical reality on this planet depend on what we believe about the soul and who has one.

And to help in this endeavour, let me begin with a few stories. Indigenous author Patty Krawec in her book: *Becoming Kin*, tells the story of when she reconnected with her father in her late 20s. She had been born on an indigenous reserve in Northern Ontario called Sioux Lookout, but had left as a child and had never returned. She and her father made the trip back. She was amazed that when she got there, many people from the community remembered her.

But even more fascinating to Patty was the experience she had when she went into the forest, a forest full of black spruce trees. She came to a lake in the forest. She writes that “it felt so familiar that it ached.” She also writes that when she went down to the beachfront of the lake, she put her hands in the water. What she experienced and felt when she did that totally astonished her. In her words: the water “remembered me. I cannot tell you how or why I knew that. It was completely unexpected, this sensation of both remembering and being remembered. I can only describe it as electric.” Since that time, Krawec writes, she's had other experiences or “reminders” as she calls them, revealing how the land is alive. Isn't this amazing?

I know some of you have had similar experiences when you've visited special places, and you've shared such experiences with me.

Here's another story and it comes from my brother Nick. Not so long ago he and my sister-in-law visited family in Armenia. He and we have never been to Armenia before and the nation itself, territorially, was carved out after the Armenian genocide in the 1920s. As far as I know my Armenian ancestors have not come from that part of the world, and yet who knows how human genes intersect with life, people and earth. He was visiting an old church long abandoned as many are in rural areas. He went inside and when he placed his hand on the wall he felt something electric akin to what Patty experienced from the lake. Nick felt such a strange sensation like he was seen and known, that somehow he belonged here in a way difficult to put into words. He encouraged me to make the trip for myself.

So what is this kind of thing about? Does it suggest that the earth, and perhaps creatures too, have connections with us and communicate in ways that transcend life and even death? Does the earth and possibly animals have souls like we humans do? And is such life on the earth and in animals immortal, transcending time like we humans have life in us that transcends time?

The father of modern western sociology is a man named Max Weber. Weber lived, taught and wrote 125 years ago in Europe. He coined the phrase some of you may have heard describing our modern world as "disenchanted." Before the modern world, most people believed that souls or spirits lived in and through all things in the universe. The world was an enchanted, magical place. But modern science and the technology it introduced has disenchanted our world. One modern philosopher who influenced this development was Rene Descartes. Descartes taught that only humans have minds or souls. The rest of the world – earth and animals, are like machines without complex brains. They're like raw material we can shape and use to our human purposes. They don't feel like we feel. Sadly, this has only led to our human denigration and alienation from the rest of creation leading to our current climate crisis and imperilled biodiversity. Our technology has been developed with total disregard of how it affects other life on this planet including human lives outside of our orbit. Isn't this sad.

And equally sad is the fact that we have read this modern mindset into the bible too. But this is not the world out of which the bible was composed. The ancient world believed the divine moved through all life not just human life. Ancient Greek Stoic philosophy taught that all living beings have part of the divine in them, a "divine spark" that moved through all things. Celtic spirituality and many other more indigenous spiritualities have always believed that the natural world is enchanted and that all lives have souls, not just humans.

And this brings us to our scripture reading this morning. Psalm 148 is near the last of a large collection of psalms all intended for use in worship. Through words and song Psalms are supposed to take people through all their beliefs and enrich them at the heart level. Through

praise and thanksgiving, anger and grief, intense pleas to God for healing and deliverance, and a search for renewed faith and hope in what God can and will do as God has done for the people in the past, psalms are intended for full body and soul expression and connection with God. Psalm 148 is a wonderful example, and not a unique example, of how the world is seen and experienced by the people. Just like the first chapter of the bible presents creation by God beginning with light and dark, the heavens and the earth, and then the animals in the sky, the oceans, on land and in the earth, and finally, the creation of humans, so, this psalm presents all of creation praising God in a similar order of coming to be with humans completing what is already an active creation.

And mark the words. All life in the world is called to praise God, and all life is invited to participate in praising God. The word “let” is invitational. It’s like God wants to dance and needs partners. All that lives are worthy candidates, and humans are not singled out or set apart as more worthy of being called to partner with God and praise God.

But there’s more here, far more. To be called to praise and to be invited to sing and dance means that you have agency and choice. You are a person. God doesn’t just dictate what you are to do but wants you to participate in praising. To praise you have to do it from your heart and engage your body too. You have to love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, to quote what Jesus and the bible also say. Sun and moon, mountains and sea creatures, wild animals, trees and flying birds... all are called body and soul to participate in praise.

So, does this mean that not just humans but all that is alive has a soul and lives before God? Absolutely. There is no other way to read this passage just like many other passages in the bible. All life lives before God now and eternally. Life and death are something we all share, but there is also continuity of life in some way because praise before God is eternal. We pass on life to others even as the life that flows through us continues in some way. The key here is that humans are not singled out as extra special or different in worth and soul before God.

And all this is super important for us for at least two reasons. First, if we denigrate a part of creation with the belief that they have no soul, we can treat them as we want and use them as we want because we don’t believe they feel or care or hurt as we humans do. But at what point does such denigration also extend to other humans whom we judge as inferior. The root of all racism stems from this idea that some humans are less human and therefore have less of a soul. Whether it’s the colour of your skin, your race, your beliefs, your sexuality or your gender not fitting appropriate norms for male and female as we decide they should be, historically, we European North Americans have made harsh judgements and even, at times, called it scientific, declaring that some are more human and some are less so based on measurements we have deemed authoritative.

So then, the biblical declaration that all life, not just human life and not just some human life are worthy of God's attention, care and love needs to be reaffirmed again and again. All lives not just some lives have infinite value before God, be they citizens or migrant refugees, be they Jewish or Palestinian, be they North American, European or from any other part of the world, be they straight or queer, cis-gendered or transgendered. We don't decide who has more value than who.

And this brings me to a second and last point. Advent is about the coming of Christ and his incarnation as a human being, as Emmanuel – God with us, to quote the Christmas story in the gospel. But just because Jesus is incarnated as a human it doesn't mean humans have more value than other lives in creation. Traditionally we've always tended to interpret God and Christ in an exclusionary way. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, the gospel says, and that must mean other ways and truths are wrong we have thought. But what if Jesus' words are meant to be understood inclusively? Jesus is the way, the truth and the life and Jesus becomes one of us to show us how to love, how to include and how to welcome others outside our circle. We humans are complex and complicated. How we behave can make all the difference to the rest of life on this planet. Jesus comes as God with us to help us heal, so that all creation may experience healing. We can be inspired by Christ to love or we can allow our fear to mistrust, judge, hate and ultimately harm other life creating broken relationships and destruction in our world. Jesus becomes one of us because our redemption is essential for the welfare of all creation.

So then, do we have a soul? Yes we do and we live before our creator always in some form. Do we rise up after we die? Yes we do and our lives must stand before our redeemer to face justice with mercy and the vindication of wrongs victims have suffered. Do other lives, non-human lives, animals and earth have a soul? I now follow more indigenous and ancient understandings, which I believe are in the bible too, teaching that all life has a part of God in them and all life is called to praise God and to reciprocate such love in some way. The question for us humans is: will we join the song and dance of praise? Will we recognize afresh our God-given purpose to love, care and cherish the life around us, all the life around us, as our lives are so cherished?

Let us pray: Come to us this Advent season and come to us this Christmas, O God. Remind us that we have a soul and challenge us to see how all that lives also has soul. Help us cherish life better than we have done – our lives and all life around us. Amen.