

“Hildegard of Bingen & Creative Spiritual Practice”

A sermon by the Rev. Susie Bjork
Bay Shore Community Congregational Church – June 9, 2024
Third Sunday After Pentecost – Lesson: Psalm 98:4-9

Creator God, thank you for your ever-present love and ever-moving Spirit that flows through all creation, bring love, life, and wholeness. May we open our hearts to you in this time of worship, prayer, and praise. Amen.

There once was a Benedictine nun who wandered the fertile countryside of her Germanic home and was so moved by the beauty and verdancy of God’s green earth, by her personal experiences of God’s holy, luminous presence, and by the divinely-gifted songs of the cosmos that welled up within her soul, that for her the hills really were “alive with the sound of music.” And no, her name was not Maria von Trapp (though some of these experiences may have been true for Maria too). Her name was Hildegard von Bingen.

Hildegard lived in the Rhine River Valley in Germany from 1098 to 1179. She was the youngest child of ten and began her monastic journey at the very young age of 8 when her parents tithed her to the church and gave into the care of a cloistered anchoress named Jutta who would be her stand-in mother, mentor, teacher, and instructor in the Benedictine way of life for the next thirty years. Hildegard took her full vows at age 18 and when Jutta died in 1136, Hildegard became the abbess of her order at age 38.

Hildegard’s 81 years of life were full and rich, though she had her share of struggles too. She was known to have suffered from some kind of chronic and sometimes debilitating illness throughout her life. Some have surmised that frequent migraines may have been part of her affliction. And some historians have suggested that this may have been why her parents gave her to the church at such a young age. Perhaps they believed that life in a monastic community would be the safest and most secure life for a child who was so often ill. It makes me wonder if they didn’t expect her to grow into adulthood.

If so, they were clearly wrong. Though she dealt with chronic illness, Hildegard lived a long and fruitful life and left quite a legacy of creative spiritual work, all of which was grounded in a personal and experiential awareness of God that she trusted and that manifested in her life in various ways. It’s clear that Hildegard’s spirituality helped her navigate life’s ups and downs.

Hildegard experienced visions from the time she was a child. But she didn’t tell anyone about this until later on in life. Even back in the 12th century (not unlike today) such things were met with skepticism by some. But at age 42, she felt a clear call from God to share what she had experienced. And so, she sought out ecclesiastical authorization to share her visions (because that was required). And she received it. So, she dictated her experiences to a monk and scribe who was also her confidant and friend. And he, along with one of the nuns of the convent, wrote them down in Latin.

Like many manuscripts of the Middle Ages, the final books of her visions incorporated illuminations, including the ones in your bulletin insert. Hildegard probably didn’t paint these illuminations herself, but they are illustrations of her visions and she probably had some role in their creation. Perhaps she drew a sketch. Perhaps she told the painter what to paint. Bringing her visions to life both in word

and image so others could experience them became a collaborative effort within her monastic community. I like that. It wasn't just her personal work of art; it became their collective work of art.

Hildegard was also a musician. We know she composed at least 77 songs because we still have them. There may have been more that are now lost to history. Many of these are vocal works, particularly chants for her nuns to sing as they observed their daily prayers. Much of her poetry conveys a spiritual passion that still rings true. And her lofty, and sometimes unusual melodies have been lifted up as fairly unique musical contributions.

Many of Hildegard's songs lift up feminine personifications of Divine attributes such as wisdom and love. And she composed many songs in praise to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Her songs are clearly prayers of devotion and adoration.

I heard one musician comment that if you slow down the vocal runs in modern soul music, it starts to sound a lot like Hildegard's chants. And he pointed out that the purpose of soul music (of any form or era) is to actually clear out your soul. Singing can be cathartic and therapeutic, a healthy expression of whatever needs to be given voice. And, in voicing our soul's wonderings, longings, prayers, and wisdom, we may also recognize the song the Holy Spirit is singing with us, in us, through us. This can be true of any form of creative expression.

Hildegard also wrote, composed, and staged the first known "morality play" in 1150 that illustrated a soul's journey away from temptation and towards virtue. This was very popular medieval subject matter and morality plays became pretty popular in the later Middle Ages, but Hildegard was a pioneer in her day. So, why talk about Hildegard on musical theater Sunday? Because she was producing musical theater 874 years ago! She was one of the first, in Europe at least.

For Hildegard, music really was a daily spiritual practice. And it was a practice that had both personal and communal dimensions to it. Singing was part of the rhythm of life for her and her Benedictine sisters. As they sang their daily offices, marking the hours, her personal compositions were brought to collective life and transcendent expression through the shared spiritual practice of her community. In lifting their voices in song, they believed they were joining the choirs of angels and harmonizing with the Divine music of the cosmos.

Isn't this still true for us? Every time we get momentarily lost in the beauty, caught up in the soulful sound, sometimes moved to tears...

It seems that Hildegard felt music deep within her soul and felt compelled to give it form and expression. She experienced divine inspiration and felt called to share it. That is the artistic process for many artists in every medium. And it is a deeply spiritual process.

Hildegard was regularly inspired by the ever-evolving and unfolding creativity of the Creator. One of her greatest theological contributions was what she referred to as *Viriditas* (Latin for greenness, vitality, lushness, and growth). *Viriditas*, for Hildegard, is God's greening power, the life-force of God that is at work within all creation – sustaining all that is alive and bringing forth new life in myriad ways, in every moment. And we are called to take notice of this *Viriditas* and connect with it, tap into it, be enlivened by it, and help give expression to it through our living.

Embrace God's greening, proclaimed Hildegard. Be God's greening agent. Be life-giving, nurturing, fertile, fresh, and budding. Bear fruit. Whatever you do, don't dry up. Don't be dead wood.

The remarkable thing is that she actually said stuff like “don’t dry up” to abbots, bishops, popes, and political leaders in her day. And many of them actually listened to her and respected her advice. In fact, she was even allowed to preach in public venues – not many women at that time got to do that.

She was courageous, self-assured, and honest in her willingness to share her insights and ideas with the predominantly-male leaders of her day. I love that about her.

Later medieval mystics and theologians including Francis of Assisi and others would also deeply ponder the natural world and find divine inspiration within creation. But Hildegard was an early adopter and helped lead their way.

Imagery and metaphors inspired by the natural world and God’s greening power figure prominently in some of her poetry. Consider this song she composed to Mary:

*Hail, O greenest branch,
sprung forth in the airy breezes
of the prayers of the saints.*

*So the time has come
that your sprays have flourished:
hail, hail to you,
because the heat of the sun has exuded from you
like the aroma of balm.*

*For the beautiful flower sprung from you
which gave all parched perfumes
their aroma.*

Mary, the green branch. Jesus, the beautiful, fragrant flower.

Hildegard also seemed to be always searching for healing throughout her life; partly for herself, and also for others. For healing, she also turned to the natural world. She sought out, tried out, and catalogued hundreds of natural remedies using herbs, foods, stones, anything nature could provide. She believed that just about everything in God’s creation had the potential to nourish, help, and heal.

There are people who still use some of her remedies to this day and have found them helpful, especially when it comes to preventative care and general healthy living. There is even a clinic in Germany that is dedicated to her healing work. After all, she lived to be 81 in the 12th century. She was probably right on about some things. Not all of her remedies may stand up to modern scientific scrutiny. But that’s ok.

Science and spirituality weren’t separate for Hildegard. What I find inspiring about her as a healer is that she engaged the natural world and the science of her day deeply, reverently, and with an open mind and heart. She looked to creation for the source of our healing. And there is deep truth to that. Much health – physical, mental, and spiritual; individual and collective, can be found by rooting ourselves deeply in nature, remembering our interdependent connection with all that is, with one another, and trusting in God’s incarnational Spirit, God’s *Viriditas*, that enlivens us all.

In fact, I think this is the kind of healing that we are in desperate need of in today's world.

Hildegard was eventually canonized as a saint and named one of only four female Doctors of the Catholic Church in 2012. She has some things to teach us.

It seems to me that Hildegard embraced creativity in every aspect of her life. Poetry, music, sharing her visions and spiritual insights, concocting healing remedies – embracing creativity was central to her spiritual practice.

Creativity is something we all can embrace in our own spiritual journeys too. Visual art, writing, movement, music, all creative expression can be prayer. And, even more broadly, we can also seek out creative ways to accomplish mundane daily tasks, use our creativity in the ways we form and sustain deep and live-giving relationships, use creativity in addressing life's big challenges and the world's big issues.

When we embrace our own innate creativity in any form, we are tapping into the creativity of our Divine Creator. It's there. We just need to nurture it, practice it, be open to its leading, and utilize it for our wellbeing and for the health of the world.

There is also great spiritual value in embracing the creativity of others. We can practice listening deeply and looking deeply when encountering art in any form. And we might just discover some wisdom, some truth we need to hear or see.

So, I'd like to conclude by allowing us a couple of minutes to connect to some of Hildegard's work. We going to listen to one of Hildegard's chants. You may close your eyes and listen. You can spend a little time looking at her illuminations in the bulletin insert. How you use these two minutes is entirely up to you.

These are the words of Hildegard's song of praise to Divine Love:

*Love abounds in all
From the depths exalted and excelling over every star,
and most beloved of all,
For to the highest King the kiss of peace she gave.*

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May you take inspiration from Hildegard to embrace your creativity, be nourished by the creativity of others, and always connect with the creative, greening goodness of God. Amen.