

11 April 2021

Guides on the Journey: Hildegard of Bingen

2 Kings 22:11-14

We begin today with little known incident in scripture. King Josiah – one of the few good kings of Judah – commanded a major renovation of the temple. One day the priest in charge of that work sent a messenger to the king with a scroll that he said they had found. It contained the Law of Moses and some warnings for the nation if they didn't follow those laws. Which they hadn't. We pick up the story in 2 Kings chapter 22, verses 11-14:

¹¹When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes. ¹²Then the king commanded the priest Hilkiah, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Achbor son of Micaiah, Shaphan the secretary, and the king's servant Asaiah, saying, ¹³'Go, inquire of the Lord for me, for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found; for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our ancestors did not obey the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us.' ¹⁴ So the priest Hilkiah, Ahikam, Achbor, Shaphan, and Asaiah went to the prophetess Huldah the wife of Shallum son of Tikvah, son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe; she resided in Jerusalem in the Second Quarter, where they consulted her.

Have you ever heard of Huldah the prophetess before? It wouldn't be all that surprising if you haven't. What's surprising is that she made it in at all. Look at who runs Israel – a bunch of men. And then, even when Huldah is mentioned, note how she is identified: by the name of her husband and the name of her father-in-law *and* her father-in-law's father, and by her husband's profession (keeper of the wardrobe). So this is not an egalitarian society. Men run things, and women are seen as adjuncts to the men in their lives. And yet . . . and yet when they need to consult God, who is the first person they think of to ask? Huldah. And let me be clear: Huldah was not the only prophet in Jerusalem. The prophet Zephaniah, whose book is in our Bible, was in Jerusalem during Josiah's time, but they don't go to Zephaniah. Sometimes there are just people in whom the Spirit of God is apparent, and those people don't always – or even usually – fit the expectations of the culture. Huldah was apparently one of those. For the next few weeks in our services, we're going to be looking at some of those people in whom the Spirit is obvious.

Here's why we're doing this: one of the basic tasks of the church is to foster spiritual growth among the faithful. In our church, we call that goal "Spiritual Formation." But how do we do that? Well, the short answer too often is: badly. You see, we Protestants trace our origins to the 16th century, which was also the beginning of the Age of Reason, the Enlightenment, and the Scientific Revolution. Influenced by that era of intellectual discovery, we have for 500 years now equated spiritual formation with gaining knowledge and tried to foster spiritual growth through learning. Well, there's nothing wrong with learning. We *should* know our Bibles and be able to talk intelligently about our faith. But learning isn't enough. If we pay attention to the Bible as we gain all that knowledge, we might notice that Jesus himself calls for a lot of things, but not one of them is advanced learning. (In the gospels, at least, people with advanced learning come off sort of badly, in fact.) No, Jesus calls for humility, integrity, compassion, justice for all people, self-sacrifice, service.

These are difficult things to gain from a class, from studying them. Take humility, for instance. Knowing a lot about humility does not make you humble. It might even have the

opposite effect. (“I know more about humility than you.”) No, if you go to a person who is truly humble and ask, “Where did you get that?” You will get one of two answers. First, you might be told “through life experience.” We have all been humbled by life; some people actually learn from it. But it’s far more likely that they’ll say, “from my parents” or “from my grandmother” or from someone else who embodied humility and inspired them to be like that. We learn goodness from good people. For the next six weeks I want to introduce you to some people who have inspired me, people who embody something worth imitating in our journey toward Christ. I didn’t do this on purpose, but when I looked at the list I settled on, I realized that none of them had official positions of authority. Any authority that they had in their lives was like the authority of Huldah the prophetess: granted to them in spite of everything by people who recognized in them the power of the Holy Spirit.

We start in the 12th century, with Hildegard of Bingen. She was born in 1098 to a family of the lesser German nobility, but by the time she was eight, she was already having visions of God, and her family turned her over to a Benedictine convent to raise her. I’m guessing this was partly “She belongs in the service of God” and partly “What are we supposed to do with this?” In addition to those visions, Hildegard was – to put it simply – a genius. Now, being a genius has nothing to do with following God. At best it’s a neutral factor; lots of brilliant people are evil. But, it helps us imagine Hildegard. By the time she died, some 70 years later, she had written multiple books on botany and is considered the founder of German natural science. For instance, she was the first to write about the use of hops in beer as a preservative. She wrote an early medical manual – “Causes and Cures” – that stretched to many volumes of herbal and holistic medicine. Hildegard also wrote music. She learned to play the psaltery, a 10-stringed lyre, and composed music for the convent. More of her compositions survive today than any other contemporary composer, and they continue to be performed and studied. She was a poet and wrote lyrics in praise of God to accompany her music. She also wrote at least one play, which was, a musical. She wrote three multivolume works of theology, based largely on her own visions, which continued throughout her life, and she was a visual artist. She supervised the illuminations of her own theological books, and her art was centuries beyond anything else that was being done at the time. So, yeah, I think the term genius applies.

But for our purposes, what matters is not how gifted she was but how she used those gifts: always to glorify God. She remained a sister her entire life, still seeing visions, often while ill with debilitating headaches. It sounds as if she had chronic, severe migraines – which makes a certain amount of sense. Her visual art often represents a kaleidoscope of colors, similar to those sometimes seen by severe migraine sufferers. Even her agony she turned into beauty and praise of God.

For her first thirty or so years she lived in the convent where her parents had taken her, which was connected to a Benedictine monastery. In her thirties, the other nuns chose her to be their leader – Mother Superior, I suppose – and the abbot of the monastery made her an offer. He wanted to appoint her prioress of the convent. Hildegard declined. As prioress she would be under the authority of that abbot. She proposed instead starting a new order, in a different location, made up entirely of sisters, independent. The abbot categorically refused, so Hildegard went over his head and got it approved by the archbishop. Soon, she and her sisters moved to Rupertsberg, on the Rhine, and began a new community. It was from that position that she accomplished all the things I just listed, and there she became influential. Her correspondence,

much of which survives, included letters to popes and kings, and she went on several preaching tours in Germany, mostly preaching against church corruption.

If all this strikes you as strange, you ain't kidding. Twelfth century Europe was even less egalitarian than Josiah's Jerusalem in Huldah's time. Women simply didn't do that. Any of it. But Hildegard did. She has become something of a feminist icon, which is justifiable, but that's not the thing I want to talk about for our last few minutes. I want to talk about how Hildegard expressed her faith through art.

With all that Hildegard could do, her most enduring legacy is her works of music and poetry and drama and visual art. A woman of a million published words, she chose to express her deepest experiences of God, her visions, through art. Why? Because, when you think about it, there's a lot of overlap between faith and art. The artist while creating the work, and often the listener or reader or viewer who is experiencing it, become utterly absorbed by it, and in that absorption they lose themselves. Putting *yourself* aside is necessary for growing toward God – “deny yourself,” as Jesus put it – and art is one of the best ways to learn that. But art doesn't just help us to set *ourselves* aside, it invites the Spirit in. People have always recognized that – that the artist appears to be in contact with some world beyond this one. The Greeks talked about the “Muses,” but we talk about the Holy Spirit. In one interesting story in the Hebrew Bible, two kings go to Elisha the prophet and ask for a word from God. Elisha replies, “I got nothing. Send in a musician and then ask me” (2 Kings 3:15). No wonder we call great art “inspired.” Finally, when the artist is creating, she is reproducing the creative act of God: creating something not for a purpose, but simply out of love and the desire to create. No one understands the God of creation better than an artist.

And note this: all that I'm saying about art is true *even if the art is not about God*. Art is not spiritual only when it communicates some moral lesson or theological truth. In fact, art that is designed to teach a moral lesson is generally bad art, and when art touches on theological matters, it is frequently not orthodox. Hildegard's art was always about God, but it was emphatically *not* typical for 12th century theology. In her Spirit-filled art, as in her Spirit-filled life, Hildegard pushed buttons and crossed boundaries. That's my final point: art and faith are both subversive. In society and religion, we tend to build walls to make ourselves feel safe. You know the Spirit's at work when walls start to crumble. Art and true faith are the Spirit's tools.

Let me try to sum this up. Art and faith are not the same thing, but they travel parallel paths and share some perspectives. Both art and faith perceive that most people live shallow lives, lives of day-to-day comfortable and empty repetition. But they also see that just beneath that thin crust, there are depths of meaning that most people are either unaware of or are doing their best to ignore. Both art and faith set out to break that crust and reveal the depths. Both are driven by the conviction that frightening truth is better than comfortable delusion. Art and faith both seek to throw open doors to a world of depth and darkness and power that lies just beyond our normal existence. Now, faith goes farther than art. Art tears down the illusions, but doesn't always know what to do next. Faith points beyond the depths to a world of hope that lies even further. Nevertheless, for much of the journey, faith and art are companions, and those saints like Hildegard – or Bach or Dante or Graham Greene or Rembrandt – who lived in both worlds can be powerful guides for us on the journey.