

**First UCC Northfield**  
**September 25, 2022**  
**Mystics Series: Hildegard of Bingen**  
**Job 12:7-10**

1

**Scripture**

Job 12:7-10 God said to Job,  
*“But ask the animals, and they will teach you,  
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;  
ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you,  
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.  
Who among all these does not know  
that the hand of God has done this?  
In God’s hand is the life of every living thing  
and the breath of every human being*

**Sermon**

I don’t know about you, but as the seasons turn, I’ve been seeing a lot of crows in my neighborhood recently. Maybe I’m just noticing them and they’ve been there all along, but because of that, I read an [article](#) that came across social media about crows. It was about how people who have intentionally fed or tended wounded crows. Every person reports how those crows consistently bring back all sorts of gifts: feathers, keys, buttons, polished rocks, bits of yarn, smashed toy cars, candy wrappers, shells, broken tool handles. Not only that, that they recognize and are in relationship with the people who tended to them. It brings to my mind the words of our scripture today.

*Ask the animals, and they will teach you, ask the birds of the air, God says to Job, and they will tell you...in God’s hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being.*

Frederick Beuchner said something similar. In recounting the story of ravens bringing Elijah food when he was alone on the mountain, Beuchner recalled that God told the ravens to bring Elijah food, but in Beuchner’s witty, wise way, he noted, “The sleek, black birds ... [saw the starving prophet and knew] that since all life is one life, to save another is to save yourself. [So] with their wings, and beaks, and throbbing birds’ hearts all working at once, the ravens set about doing it.”<sup>1</sup> They paid attention to the world around them and acted accordingly.

Nature can be a great teacher, as many know. The writer of the book of Job knew it, Jesus knew it, Hildegard of Bingen knew it. And many contemporary writers remind us too. Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor has said, like theologians through the ages, that the Bible is the little book, and the natural world is the big book. Wendell Barry’s writes in his poem “The Peace of Wild Things:” “When despair for the world grows in me...I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in...beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things...”

*Ask the animals, and they will teach you, ask the birds of the air, and they will tell you...in God’s hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, originally published in [Whistling in the Dark](#) and later in [Beyond Words](#)

**First UCC Northfield**  
**September 25, 2022**  
**Mystics Series: Hildegard of Bingen**  
**Job 12:7-10**

2

As we conclude our series on mystics, today we dwell for a moment in the world of Hildegard of Bingen. Now, Matthew Fox, who has studied and taught on Hildegard of Bingen for the last 30 or so years, notes that if Hildegard had one main theme, it would be “to wake up to the world around us.”<sup>2</sup> Hildegard, among her vast works, long life, and skills, above all, invites people through her work, to a deeper sense of awareness. Like Jesus, Hildegard regarded nature as a great teacher that points to God. Quite prophetically, she also said that disregarding nature would cause nature—not God, nature—to punish people.

In a quiet interlude in the book of Job in what is otherwise an unsurprisingly heavy chapter, God tells Job,

*Ask the animals, and they will teach you,  
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;  
ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you,  
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.  
Who among all these does not know  
that the hand of God has done this?  
In God's hand is the life of every living thing*

This could be the refrain for Hildegard of Bingen's mysticism, too. That the animals, birds, plants, fish and all of creation point to God, to original goodness, love, and creativity. In fact, Hildegard said that Adam's original sin wasn't eating the apple, it was his “failure to take delight in the beauty and grace of creation”.<sup>3</sup>

When receiving visions from God, Hildegard often pointed to nature. Being from the Rhineland, we can imagine the verdant green that surrounded her. When she became frustrated in the limitations of language to describe what she was coming to learn, Hildegard created her own language to better express the visions she received. For example, she took the Latin words for green, *viridis*, and truth, *veritas*, and combined them into the word *viriditas*. *Viriditas* is meant to express God's creative, growing, healing power in the world. God, she envisioned, in the 1100s, “reaches all of our lives through creativity and greening power, filling ‘all things with interconnectivity and interrelationship.’”<sup>4</sup> This earth-based revelation grounds—is almost assumed—in much of Hildegard's work.

Born in 1098 near Mainz, Germany, Hildegard was the 10<sup>th</sup> child born to her noble parents, and was—some say—tithed at age 8 to the church. She was entrusted to a religious young woman named Jutta, who with Hildegard, entered a Benedictine monastery. (Now I know stewardship season is coming, but please don't tithe your children, here or anywhere else).

Hildegard and Jutta were there for 30 years together until Jutta died. So at age 38, Hildegard took Jutta's place as the teacher and leader of their religious community. From there,

---

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Fox, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Saint for Our Times, Unleashing Her Power in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Vancouver: Namaste, 2012 p.xix.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 1.

**First UCC Northfield**  
**September 25, 2022**  
**Mystics Series: Hildegard of Bingen**  
**Job 12:7-10**

3

Hildegard moved with her sisters a couple of times, establishing monasteries along the way. Though she had reported receiving visions since the age of 3, Hildegard hadn't written any down. She had also been ill, on and off, through her life. Over the course of years, three times she received these words, "speak and write." Finally, at age 42, which was *aged* for that time when the average lifespan was about 40 years, Hildegard began to write them down.

She started with *Scivias*, her first major written piece, wrote two more big volumes as well as the only known full medieval opera 300 years before opera was a thing. She continued writing for nearly 40 years, volumes on including works with thousands of remedies for healing with plants, and an emphasis on balance.

Hildegard also created 77 unique music works, innovating and expanding on traditional music theories using themes Mozart and Hayden would do 600 years later. She viewed music as a way to awaken to God's presence. She said that she had heard the singing of angels and had to write it down. In her opera, the devil character only has speaking lines, and is the only character who never sings. Singing, for Hildegard was a way for people to commune with God.

Her 36 pieces of art, were also from visions, one of which you see on the bulletin cover. Her art was often in the form of mandalas, and explained very specific complex theological ideas or understandings of the world.

Hildegard's herbal pharmacology is still used by some today with success. Anecdotally, a clergy colleague of mine has a book on Hildegard's herbalism, that her spouse, who is a physician read the book. He regularly exclaimed out loud while reading, "yes! She's right! There are medicines made from that plant now!"

In her letters, some of which are critiques of leaders, the church, and nobility behavior which do not mince words, Hildegard used the wisdom of nature. She accused the "pope of being surrounded by men who bark like dogs" or are like "hens who make noise in the night and terrify themselves."<sup>5</sup> At the same time, Hildegard describes how people can become like lush river valleys or flowing orchards, insisting that people are co-creating with God and nature, making the world what it is. She regularly returned to the idea of the Holy Spirit as "greening power, referring to the Holy Spirit as the green sap inside all of us." That we are like trees, meant to be rooted in goodness, and that the only sin in life is drying up, and insisting that God is warm vigor that hugs the world, a nourishing, firm, greening so that all creatures might grow.<sup>6</sup>

*Ask the animals, and they will teach you, the birds of the air, and they will tell you;  
ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you...<sup>10</sup> In God's hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being....*

There is so much to say about Hildegard of Bingen. Admittedly, I took out all of my favorite Hildegard stories for the sake of time. Let me just give you this teaser—when she and her entire community were essentially excommunicated when she was 80, she did not take it sitting down.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 92-3.

**First UCC Northfield**  
**September 25, 2022**  
**Mystics Series: Hildegard of Bingen**  
**Job 12:7-10**

4

All in all, we are lucky that when she died at age 81 in 1179, Hildegard's sisters went about preserving her works and writing about her life. Her own creativity and work was prolific, and interdisciplinary. Though it is possible to get wonderfully immersed in her works, I don't think that Hildegard would want us to get stuck on being awed only by her art, medicine, writing, or music. I think she would encourage *us* to pay attention, to use our *own* senses to soak up to the natural world. To understand that God's loving presence is abundant, and that with God's help, we are co-creators with God, who make the world we want to see. And then to use whatever capacities we have to express the wonder of God.

A word about mystics before I close: Hildegard was certainly a mystic. But mystics aren't extraordinary people removed from society. You must hear this. They are ordinary people who lived in the world, sometimes in religious communities, sometimes not.

Like poets who use few words to present complex truths, or standup comedians who tell the truth about society, making it palatable through humor, mystics are just people. What makes them extraordinary is the way they pay attention. Because what they find when they pay attention—and this is true of mystics across religious traditions and across time—what they find, time and again is a God who, yes, is beyond imagining, a God who as Hildegard said, "is awesome in terror as the Thunderer's lightening, but also gentle in goodness as the sunshine."<sup>7</sup> But what mystics tend to tell us repeatedly, is that God is tender, loving, ever-present, often lighthearted, delightful, and even funny.

Hildegard told the truth about God as it was revealed to her, communicating it in as many ways as possible through her being. That's all a mystic is, really. A person who is awake, to as Hildegard would say, God's creative, greening presence in the world.

Mystics simply holding space and pay attention to see and experience God in the everyday and the ordinary. We need mystics and their revelation for *our* everyday, to remind us to awaken to what the animals, birds, plants, fish, have to tell us.

The love, interconnectedness and lightheartedness they consistently reveal through is what sustains us when all we see is illness, war, conflict, and loss. Mystics remind us through different times, places, and religious traditions that all is not actually as it seems. That the suffering of the world isn't the surprise. Rather, the incredible love, connection, and light that exists through it all, is what is what is surprising. They want us to know the Holy is there, because we can't always see it. The mystics remind us that the love, connection, creativity and power of God are indeed all around.

So as we close this series, let us experience the works of the mystics as balm, trusting that there is always more. Take two minutes today to soak in that God is always working for good, that love is the force that unites us and connects the whole universe.

May the greening, creative power of God be with you today and everyday going forward. Let us dwell in attention to the natural world around us. May we dwell in the light and music and art, and healing of God's love together always. Amen.

---

<sup>7</sup> <https://arthistoryproject.com/artists/hildegard-von-bingen/>