

Faith Story: Hildegard von Bingen



Just as a circle embraces all that is within it, so does the God-head embrace all. No one has the power to divide this circle, to surpass it, or to limit it.

These are the words of Hildegard von Bingen, the subject of today's Faith Story.

Hildegard, who lived from 1098 to 1179, was a remarkable woman, a "first" in many fields. At a time when few women wrote, she produced major works of theology and visionary writings. When few women were accorded respect, she was consulted by and advised bishops, popes, and kings. She used the curative powers of natural objects for healing and wrote treatises about natural history and the medicinal uses of plants, animals, trees, and stones. She was a prolific letter-writer and corresponded with everyone from humble penitents seeking a cure for infertility to church and state rulers asking for spiritual or political advice. Hildegard is the first composer whose biography is known, creating music for her own lushly poetic texts and writing a morality play set to music. She founded a vibrant convent; invented her own language, and, in a male-dominated church, went on preaching tours around the Rhineland.

If the church authorities had not believed that she was divinely inspired in all this work, she could easily have been put to death as a heretic. But she was instead widely known and widely revered throughout the European church.

Perhaps the most remarkable fact about Hildegard is that she accomplished so much despite spending most of her life shut away in an obscure hilltop monastery in the Rhineland.

Hildegard was the tenth child born to a noble family. As was customary with tenth children, she was dedicated at birth to the church as a tithe. When she was still a young girl, she was sent to an anchoress named Jutta to receive a religious education. By this time, she was already experiencing visions of light but she did not understand what they meant.

When Jutta died in 1136, Hildegard was appointed prioress of her community. She had continued to have visions through the years but had spoken them only to Jutta and a monk named Volmar and kept no record of them. However, a vision she received in 1141 directed her to write of what she had seen. She described the experience this way:

And it came to pass ... when I was 42 years and 7 months old, that the heavens were opened and a blinding light of exceptional brilliance flowed through my entire brain. And so it kindled my whole heart and breast like a flame, not burning but warming ... and suddenly I understood the meaning of expositions of the books.

Hildegard's ministry exploded after that. One scholar calls her the patron saint of "late bloomers". But bloom she did, drawing her visions in a series of 26 illuminations and interpretations in a book entitled *Scivias*, which translates as "Know the Way". She believed that now only her visions but also

her interpretations of them were from God and so she announced them with vigor and authority. Though Hildegard is commonly called a mystic, she did not think of these as private illuminations, in the usual way of mystical experience, but as prophetic words of God for the church. She said of her writings in *Scivias: I spoke and wrote these things not by the invention of my heart or that of any other person but as by the secret mysteries of God; I heard and received them in the heavenly places. And again I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, 'Cry out therefore, and write thus!'*

One biographer describes Hildegard as: Abbess, artist, author, composer, pharmacist, poet, preacher, theologian. All of Hildegard's work in all of those fields celebrates the glory - the radiance or living light - that is in all beings. She wrote: *There is no creation that does not have a radiance. Be it greenness or seed, blossom or beauty -- it could not be creation without it. All creation contains radiance or glory. We are struck with beauty and radiance many times every day.*

Hildegard died on September 17, 1179, precisely the date she had foretold her sisters in the convent. The nuns reported seeing two streams of light in the skies, crossing over the room where she was laid.

After being largely overlooked for centuries, Hildegard's life and work began to attract interest in the late 20th century when some of her compositions were performed in recognition of the 800th anniversary of her death. She has enjoyed a significant resurgence in public attention and there are now hundreds of recordings of her music, along with numerous biographies, novels of her life, devotional volumes of her writings, and websites devoted to her. In 2012, Hildegard was canonized by the Catholic Church. She was also named a doctor of the church, one of only four women who hold that distinction.

We could spend hours or days or longer with Hildegard whose entire life was firmly centered in her conviction of God's presence and God's love. Her accomplishments were remarkable, not just for her own time, but for any time. Her faith was strong and the expressions of faith found in her Illuminations, her writings, and her music continue to offer both beauty and wisdom. Here is one more gem from Hildegard's writings:

*Good people,
Most royal greening verdancy,
rooted in the sun,
you shine with radiant light.*

*In this circle of earthly existence
you shine
so finely,
it surpasses understanding.*

*God hugs you.
You are encircled
by the arms of the mystery of God.*