

Sermon May 2, 2010
United Church of Northfield
Acts 11: 1-18, Revelation 21: 1-6

Visions
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"Listen: there was once a king sitting on his throne. Around him stood great and wonderfully beautiful columns ornamented with ivory, bearing the banners of the king with great honor. Then it pleased the king to raise a small feather from the ground, and he commanded it to fly. The feather flew, not because of anything in itself but because the air bore it along. Thus am I, a feather on the breath of God." Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)

Introduction – Hildegard of Bingen

In the year 1141, while living in the Anchorage of the Benedictine monastery at Disibodenberg, Germany, Hildegard of Bingen, had a vision that changed the course of her life. It was a vision where God gave her instant understanding of the meaning of the religious texts, and commanded her to write down everything she would observe in her visions. Let me read to you the vision experience in Hildegard's own words:

"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 of the meaning of expositions of the books... "

These visions so disturbed her that she hesitated to act on them. Later she wrote the following about her doubts and her inadequacy:

"But although I heard and saw these things, because of doubt and low opinion of myself and because of diverse sayings of men, I refused for a long time a call to write, not out of stubbornness but out of humility, until weighed down by a scourge of god, I fell onto a bed of sickness."

During all these years Hildegard confided of her visions only to Jutta, another nun in her priory, and a monk, named Volmar, who was to become her lifelong secretary. These visions were written down almost in secrecy until at last Hildegard gained the permission of Pope Pope Eugenius (1145-53) to publish them. Her first volume of visions known as *Scivias* ("Know the Ways of the Lord") is well known today in the world of the writings of mystics.

If your stereotype idea of a mystic is of a person who lives in a fantasy world and is cut off from the realities of society, you should know that this description does not fit Hildegard of Bingen. The 10th child of a noble German family, Hildegard was apprenticed to the nun, Jutta, at the Anchorage in Disibodenburg. Steeped in the monastic traditions, she was elected as prioress at age 38, when Jutta died. Later she founded another Abby nearby and was an impressive force of creativity. One of her biographers summarizes her fame this way:

"At a time when few women wrote, Hildegard, known as "Sybil of the Rhine", 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 medicinal uses of plants, animals, trees and stones. She is the first composer whose biography is known. She founded a vibrant convent, where her musical plays were performed. Although not yet canonized, Hildegard has been beatified, and is frequently referred to as St. Hildegard. “

Transition to Paul and Acts 11 Text – Connect to PowerPoint

The story of Hildegard, and her struggle to come to terms with her visions is a good one for us to hear this morning. For we are confronted with dramatic and mystifying visions in our lectionary texts for this morning. In the book of Acts, we are presented with the Apostle Peter’s vision of the sheet coming down from Heaven holding animals of all types. Then we hear a voice from God instructing Peter to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles. In the book of Revelation, we are shown John’s vision of the heavenly city of Jerusalem coming down on a cloud. (If we had an infinite amount of time, I’d hand you all some paper and ask you to draw your idea of this vision.) Not being sure of the artistic talent in this congregation, I’m going to show you some examples in a very short PowerPoint presentation.

Show slides.

The most interesting and human thing we can discover from this short presentation is the fact that from one description of the vision come quite different pictures. If we did my draw it yourself exercise, each of you would see a somewhat different vision on paper. But, I suspect, in spite of the differences, there would be similarities. Yes, visions need to be interpreted and elaborated upon.

The Meaning of a Vision

Before we try to make a little sense out of these two visions, I want to talk about the idea of a vision in general. “Vision” is a powerful word, and, of course it has to do with SEEING. The difference is that a true “vision” is something one sees with their mind, and not their eyes. A vision is an idea that has something to do with the future. I think that most of the time, a vision connects part of our present experience with an idea of our experience in the future. So, you can see in this medieval drawing of John’s vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem coming down on a cloud, that the picture of the city looks much like the ancient city of Jerusalem. This is not surprising, for it is difficult to imagine something entirely outside of our experience.

However, God’s words that accompany the vision speak of a human experience which is radically different from today. Listen again to God’s words in Revelation:

See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them as their God;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away."

Certainly death and mourning exist today, and only God can take that away. Yes, we need God’s help to live with death and mourning, but only in Heaven will we find them gone.

The Vision in Acts

The text in Acts clearly is the story of the Spirit's power in bringing the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles. In this remarkable story, God gets Peter's attention with an amazing vision. Then he tells Peter what he wants him to do. Peter follows God's instructions and God begins to act through his servant Peter.

Hildegard's Life and Visions

How do we nurture the living out of a vision? First it is God who is master of visioning, but we are the ones to bring the vision to life. I think the life of Hildegard of Bingen is a good example of how this process works. Hildegard was born into a very religious family. Even though Hildegard's parents delivered her to the Abbey, Jutta, for training at age 8, her mother, especially continued to return to the Monastery and support it with gifts so that it might nurture the spiritual life of her daughter. (I doubt that Hildegard's parents had any idea of the creative talent which their daughter possessed.) Yet, through the Abbey, Jutta, and the deeply religious setting of the daily office of prayer and worship, Hildegard's spiritual life was deepened. Given such a spiritual setting, Hildegard would be more receptive to the visions God would give her.

The monastic setting also blessed Hildegard with faith partners who would be dedicated enough to help her record and share the visions.

Secondly, when Hildegard became the prioress of the Abbey, she engaged others in support of her visions and projects. When she wanted to found a new abbey, for example, she reached out to the noblemen of the region for support. Then she brought the monk who wrote down her visions over from his monastery to her Abbey, though this took considerable extra effort.

So, we see that living out the vision, even when it springs from the single source of God, is a process that is honed and refined in the community and through the community. Hildegard's great creative talents were celebrated and supported by her spiritual community. Without her community supporting her, Hildegard's creative genius might well have lacked a place for significant expression.

When a visionary claims a new direction, a new idea, they are living into the future and ahead of everyone else. They may be seen as a bit crazy. We can't do that, people will say. We're not ready. When Hildegard began the founding of her new abbey, there came a time when she told the other nuns, we're going to this new place and we're going to build a new abbey. She had the land, but nothing else. It was a difficult beginning, but on wing and prayer, the abbey rose into existence.

Communion and a Vision and Conclusion

Now I believe further, that visions are translated into experience. And the experience of living the vision furthers the vision, refines the vision and builds the vision. I think visions are best transmitted and taught through symbols. Jesus knew this, and so he gave us the symbols of the bread and the cup to transmit the vision from the time of the upper room to the present day.

Jesus says, "do this in remembrance of me." Jesus is saying, take this visionary idea, and move it into the future. Move it into the future, so you will not forget the vision. Move it into the future so you can continue to live it out in your day and your time.

It is interesting how many ways the vision in Acts of the Gospel for the Gentiles fits into the way we view Holy Communion. Let me just briefly explain. In the vision given by God to Peter to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles, all are welcome, both Jew and Gentile, both slave or free. Here in this place, gathered as this spiritual community, all are welcome to join Christ at his table. We come to claim the presence of Christ and the power of Christ. When we remember Jesus at table, we remember his

teachings and his vision. We remember a vision where we love our neighbor as ourselves. We remember Jesus powerful vision of healing from Isaiah which he read in the Temple early in his ministry:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me: he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

The Challenge to the United Church to Find a Vision

Our lectionary texts for this Sunday provide us with powerful visions that the Christian faith lays claim to as a part of its belief system. We would quite readily claim that Peter's vision to welcome the Gentile, leads to a vision of an extravagant welcome for all. But, like all visions, others might interpret it differently. John's vision of the New Jerusalem, narrated by God, proclaims literally freedom from death and grief. In the human reality, this is difficult to embrace. But, God's claim to "make all things new" is one we can embrace in the hope for a better tomorrow.

As the United Church of Northfield moves into the future, what might be the vision for the new United Church? What, for example, are the guiding scriptures for this church, the Church of the Good Shepherd? And how might it bring to reality the new church in this place in the future?

I think it is too early in the interim time to claim an answer to these questions. But these are questions the Search Committee will be asking and seeking answers from the congregation. Like any vision, each person will see it differently. Like any vision each one of us may have different ideas about how to live out the vision. At this stage my role is to ask the challenging questions. Yes, already it would be easy to suggest some visions of congregational life that are the fire in the belly for this congregation. I've read some of them in pastoral letters written by Linda Kulas. I look forward to listening to visions presented by folks in discussion forums, and dreams shared in home gatherings sometime in the future. Amen!

Closing Prayer Let us pray:

O God, by whose grace your servant Hildegard, kindled with the fire of your love, became a burning and shining light in your Church: Grant that we also may be aflame with the spirit of love and discipline, and walk before you as children of light; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.