

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on April 18, 2021.

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN: THE BOOK OF NATURE

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Psalm 19:1

Throughout much of Christian history the followers of Jesus understood there to be two great paths that pointed us to God. The book of Scripture was the primary authority for learning about God's plan for humankind. But theologians and average everyday Christians also looked to what was called the Book of Nature. The sheer beauty and wonder of nature were considered a pathway to contact with God.

During the period following the enlightenment this changed. Nature came to be viewed as having no relation to God. Many theologians believed that the study of nature was not a means to discover the love of God. Many scientists taught that we live in a closed universe, which meant that there was no connection between God and nature. The consequence of this was that for a long time the natural world did not serve as a means of connecting people to God.

This consensus has begun to change in the last thirty years. It is not theology that has brought about this rethinking. It has been recent developments in science, especially in cosmology, that have produced a new openness to thinking about the relationship between God and nature.

One Christian figure who can be a helpful guide in this area is our Luminary for today, Hildegard of Bingen. Hildegard is a remarkable woman who was born in Germany around 1098 AD. She was the tenth child in a family of the lower nobility. Unlike Mother Teresa, who we focused on last week, Hildegard had a sense of God's presence her whole life. Writing in her seventies she tells us:

From my early childhood, before my bones, nerves and veins were fully strengthened, I have always seen this vision in my soul, even to the present time when I am more than seventy years old. In this vision my soul, as God would have it, rises up high into the vault of heaven and into the changing sky and spreads itself out among different peoples, although they are far away from me in distant lands and places. And because I see them this way in my soul, I observe them in accord with the shifting of clouds and other created things. I do not hear them with my outward ears, nor do I perceive them by the thoughts of my own heart or by any combination of my five senses, but in my soul alone, while my outward eyes are open. So, I have never fallen prey to ecstasy in the visions, but I see them wide awake, day and night. And I am constantly fettered by sickness, and often in the grip of pain so intense that it threatens to kill me, but God has sustained me until now. The light which I see thus is not spatial, but it is far, far brighter than a cloud which carries the sun. I can measure neither height, nor length, nor breadth in it; and I call it "the

reflection of the living Light." And as the sun, the moon, and the stars appear in water, so writings, sermons, virtues, and certain human actions take form for me and gleam.

Even though Hildegard was blessed with visions and took vows as a Benedictine nun, this did not make her disconnected from the world. She took an interest in all kinds of subjects. She wrote books of theology, studies in science and helpful reflections on medicine. She was also a gifted musician. She composed words and lyrics for dozens of songs.

During her lifetime the leaders of the church sought her out for advice. She went on preaching tours to spread the faith. She is one of only four women that the Roman church has proclaimed as a "Doctor of the Church."

Hildegard was just a polymath that she could teach us about many aspects of our faith. Today we focus on her teachings about nature.

The first truth is that nature can teach us about God. The early leaders of the Christian Church called the physical world the Book of Nature. They believed that one could discover God by contemplating nature. Hildegard wrote:

**Glance at the sun. See the moon and the stars.
Gaze at the beauty of earth's greenings.
Now, think.
What delight God gives to humankind
with all these things.
All nature is at the disposal of humankind.
We are to work with it. For
without we cannot survive.**

A Bishop of the Orthodox Church, Kallistos Ware, explains the purpose of contemplation when he tells us:

It is to see God in all thing and all things in God- to discern in and through each created reality, the divine presence that is within it and at the same time beyond it. It is to treat each thing as a sacrament, to view the whole of nature as God's book.

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. The Palmist tells that we can discover God in nature.

The second truth is that nature is a creation of God, nature is not divine itself. Some of the early Christians ignored nature. They did this because of the surrounding religions of the time. Many of them worshipped nature in one form or another. In the Old Testament the Prophets condemned the worship of Baal. This was a form of nature worship. It saw the divine as being identified with nature.

There is a movement today to worship nature. In the radical environmental

movement, there are attempts to create a religion that is a form of nature worship. There are many of these groups and people both outside and inside the church who identify God the creator with his creation. A woman called Starhawk who calls herself a witch wrote:

There is no dichotomy between spirit and flesh, no split between Godhead and the world.

This is an example of seeing creation as being God. Paul says this is worshipping the creation rather than the creator. Hildegard tells us: **Every creature is a glittering, glistening mirror of Divinity.** She means we are not divine but a reflection of the divine.

You and I need to be aware that nature is not divine. We must resist the mistake to view God as being identified with creation. The physical world is God's great handiwork. The Psalmist tells us **The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.**

A third truth we learn from Hildegard is our Christian duty to care for nature. She wrote:

The earth should not be injured. The earth should not be destroyed. As often as the elements, the elements of the world are violated by ill treatment, so God will cleanse them thru the sufferings, thru the hardships of mankind.

These words and others have helped to inspire us to care for the natural order. She reminds us that if we do not care for the water, air and land we will pay a price.

The fourth truth we learn is that the beauty of the created order can point us to God. While knowing creation's proper place, Hildegard delighted in the joys and beauty of creation. The beauty of nature is not God, but it can point us to God.

The experience of the beauty of the order of nature has begun to make scientists ask the question of God. For many years God was excluded from the discussion of nature. Science, many believed, provided all the answers that were needed on its own. Yet science has begun to change.

John Polkinghorne was a physicist at Queens' College at Cambridge University. In a lecture in Connecticut he said:

In both the intelligibility of the world and the finely tuned fruitfulness of the world, we see insights arising from science, but calling for some explanation and understanding, which by its very nature, will go beyond what science itself can provide. I think that suggests the insufficiency of a merely scientific view of the world.

In fact, I think we're living in an age where there is a great revival of natural theology taking place. The revival of natural theology is taking

place, not on the whole among the theologians, who rather lost their nerve in that area, but among the scientists. And not just among pious scientist like myself, but among scientist who have no particular time for, or understanding of, conventional religion. Nevertheless, many agnostic scientists feel that the rational beauty and finely tuned fruitfulness of the world suggest that there is some intelligence or purpose behind the universe.

In other words, the beauty and order found in the study of the natural world points beyond itself. It causes the intellect to ask the question of God.

I believe that the beauty of the created order can not only point beyond itself to God but can also be a point of contact with God himself.

While in seminary I did a field education year at a Church in Clark's Summit Pennsylvania. There was a Girl Scout troop located there that was led by three women of the Church. On Columbus Day weekend that year they took their girls on an overnight outing. After dinner had been prepared and eaten, the women were in three different places as the sun went down. It was one of those beautiful red sunsets that we would all agree are of great beauty.

These three women recognized the beauty of the sunset, but all three experienced something more. Each one in their own way knew that God was present with them. They each had an intense experience of God's love and grace. In the experience of the beauty of the world, they found the presence of God and their faith was strengthened.

The beauty found in the created order can be a pathway to God if we pay attention. The beauty is all around us. It is present in the changing of the seasons. It is present in panoramic landscapes. We can pay attention to it while boating on a lake or river. We can see it while out birding or hunting. We can find awe and wonder while watching the animals at the zoo. The vastness of the universe is seen through a telescope or a microscope.

The beauty of nature is all around us, yet we do not always pay attention to it. Children seem to recognize the wonders of nature for it is new to them, but we adults sometimes seem blind to them. I would suggest that if you are able take a walk this afternoon. Go to some place like Hunter Creek or Bond's Lake. During this time rekindle the sense of awe at the created order.

Hildegard of Bingen can be an example for us. She summoned Christians to the study of nature. She calls on us to pay attention to nature. We are not to worship nature, but rather to pay attention to its beauty. If we experience the wonder of nature it can lead us into the presence of our Creator, but only if we pay attention.

Hildegard tells us **All of creation is a song of praise to God.**

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.