

“Walking towards Healing: Perception”

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Scripture: Gospel of Matthew 4:23-25

Contemplative Text: From Physica by St. Hildegard von Bingen

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“I saw such a great light that my soul quaked.... The heavens were opened and a blinding light of exceptional brilliance flowed throughout my entire brain.... [Thus] came the commandment from God to say and write what [I’d] see and hear.”

St. Hildegard von Bingen: twelfth-century prophet, anchorite, religious leader, author, composer, physician, woman of God, and...highly-sensitive person and migraine-sufferer?

The quote we just heard comes from the writings of St. Hildegard. It’s a wonder that we have written records by any figure from the twelfth century, especially from a woman. St. Hildegard was born into an aristocratic family, and she experienced her first blinding vision from God at the age of three or four. Her parents promised her to a convent at the age of eight. It was very common, at the time in medieval Europe, to promise a child (who had visions or not) to religious life and pay an amount akin to a dowry to shelter, feed, and—in a sense—raise the child. St. Hildegard entered the convent of Disibodenberg in Germany at the age of fourteen in the early 1100s, a practice about which she reported having mixed feelings, though she deemed fourteen was old enough to consent to fully devoting oneself to convent life.

St. Hildegard was committed as an anchorite for her first decades at Disibodenberg. “Anchorite” comes from the Koine Greek verb “anachóreó,” which means “to withdraw” or “to retreat.” The anchorite is a woman who is confined to, or plans to confine to, a room for the rest of her life, where she will devote herself to God. St. Hildegard shared a small, enclosed cell with a woman named Jutta. Enclosed in a tight, dim room attached to the St. Disibod abbey, St. Hildegard called this space her “burial chamber.” Only a slit or small window through the door connected St. Hildegard and Jutta to the outside world. Visitors would come to them and make prayer requests, and members of the abbey would pass them food, water, sacred reading

materials, and other necessities, never to come into direct contact or touch with the two women or enter their “burial chamber.” St. Hildegard devoted her time to memorizing Scripture, understanding and analyzing Church doctrines and writings, learning how to read music, and praying deeply for intercession for her community and the larger world.

St. Hildegard confides in Jutta—the only person she feels comfortable confiding in for many years after entering Bisibordenberg—about her visions. She tells Jutta that her encounters with God feel like a blinding light that overcomes her sight and all of her senses. She believes her visions come from The Shade of the Living Light, or a source of the Living God manifested on earth through human perception.

Jutta dies in 1136, and around that time, St. Hildegard moves out of her role as abbey anchorite and into Magistrate of the convent, who oversees community life for the nuns. St. Hildegard continues to keep her visions a secret until 1141, at the age of forty-two, when she receives one of her most intense encounters. As you heard at the beginning of her story, here’s how St. Hildegard recounts this vision: “The heavens were opened and a blinding light of exceptional brilliance flowed throughout my entire brain.... [Thus] came the commandment from God to say and write what [I’d] see and hear.” Still, she resists telling her community, and she continues to fall ill from the sensory overwhelm of The Shade of the Living Light. In many instances, her visions force her to be in bed for days or weeks on end, enclosed in darkness again as she was in the “burial chamber”—only, this time, alone, without Jutta beside her.

When St. Hildegard finally feels as though she cannot bear to keep silent any longer, she decides to “come out,” as it were, as a prophet experiencing perception-altering, sensory-overwhelming, divine revelations. She starts writing and sharing her story. Her experience draws the attention of Pope Eugenius in the late 1140s, and he gives her Papal approval and encouragement to publish. She writes of her visions in the first of three books about revelation, *Scivias*, or *Know the Ways of the Lord*, in 1151. If you’re keeping track, St. Hildegard is fifty-two when she completes *Scivias*. For the remainder of her life, St. Hildegard

continues experiencing visions that range from overwhelming to debilitating. She continues writing, leading her communities and fighting to plant new convents, arguing with priests and bishops about theology and religious life structures, and praying. Somehow, in her free time, she also composes over seventy musical pieces (the texts and recordings of which you can still find) and dedicates herself to the study of human biology and the natural world. In her medical text *Physica* (a passage from which you heard today), she explores how God has shaped with divinity the structures of plants, minerals, and rocks and the beings of birds and other animals. About the eagle, St. Hildegard writes, “The eagle has a marvelous nature within it and in its heart. It contains such great knowledge, shining beyond the ordinary, that the human heart cannot endure it....The many varieties of eagles have the same nature, though one may be fiercer, another gentler, or one may fly higher, another slower; just as people differ in their illnesses, but have one nature—humanity.”

I’m not a historian, but I know it’s best practice to remain skeptical of anyone who attempts to diagnose a historical figure with a modern health condition, trait, or disorder. In order to understand the historical figure more fully and accurately, it can be helpful to understand their world through their perspective, even if (especially if) it doesn’t fall in line with our twenty-first-century sensibilities. St. Hildegard and her contemporaries strongly, unequivocally, believed she was a prophetess, in the image of Miriam and Deborah, who received divine messages through *visio*. However, modern scholars and historians have had a different interpretation of St. Hildegard’s sensory overwhelm. Many folks who have studied St. Hildegard, and know a thing or two about overstimulation and neurologic disorders, have attributed her visions to migraines. Imagine if someone came to you and claimed St. Hildegard’s symptoms: an overload that affects all of her senses, a blinding aura that distorts and blinds the world, an almost-hallucinatory perception, sensitivity to external stimuli before, during, and after the incident, and a bodily fatigue that leaves her enclosed in a world of her own for days on end.

Wouldn't you also think the evidence is compelling enough to consider her a highly sensitive person (someone who is more easily affected by sensory input, like light and noise) or, at least, someone who regularly gets migraines?

Many of us here belong to a tradition that does not venerate saints. Unlike some Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, and Episcopal traditions, we do not offer prayers through saints or celebrate their feast days. At least, I don't, even though I find saints' lives fascinating, rich, and compelling, and I even have prayer cards and have led some religious education on saints. Instead, I/we appreciate their stories of hardship and connection to God, Christ, and Spirit in the long lineage of our ecumenical Christian history. Yes, this is true, and, also, we believe deeply in the mystery of our faith and the complicated ways that Divinity, the Trinity, reveals themselves to us in a way our human perception has trouble rationalizing into our logical world.

So, were St. Hildegard's visions prophetic or simply migraines? I don't think anyone but God can know for sure. But, here's what I do know: there is much we can learn from the story of a medieval, polymath woman who was all at once much too bold and much too sensitive for the world. There is much we can learn from a disabled woman of God navigating the call of her faith and the harshness of human experience. There is much we can learn from St. Hildegard's perspective, and how it fits into Jesus's ministry and, maybe even, our own.

For a long while, I found myself connected to St. Hildegard, without really understanding why. (Actually, a few of my friends do, too—one of my close friends, Gray, has named his cat Hildy after her!) Then, several months ago, I learned more about the specifics and intensity of her migraines from the podcast *Queer as Fact*. It suddenly clicked: why I had felt this kinship with St. Hildegard. I saw myself mirrored in her experience. As some of you know, I experience vision-altering, painful, and fatiguing migraines, somewhat similar to St. Hildegard's, a few times a year. Most days, I experience what I call overstimulation. Usually in the afternoon, the world becomes too loud for me—colors too bright, lights from lamps or the sun too piercing, sounds

ear-aching. I develop a headache or fatigue, and I feel like I need to enclose myself in darkness for a while. I recently learned other people struggle with the same sensory issues—probably, several of you sitting in this space or watching online. Highly sensitive people (a term coined by psychologist Dr. Elaine N. Aron) share these traits, as well as people who are neurodivergent, have ADHD or Autism Spectrum Disorder, or have experienced psychological or physical trauma. Receiving my ADHD diagnosis and identifying as an HSP has opened the door to accepting how my brain and my nervous system interact with the world around me. I feel more ready to accept my brain and my nervous system and trust my perception of the world, which can feel deep, bright, and nuanced. I love this quote by Dr. Aron, an HSP herself: “I am deeply moved by things. I’d hate to miss the intense joy of that.”

The theme of today’s worship service is “healing.” I don’t think I really need to be healed—or, what I mean is, I don’t think I need someone to wave a wand over my head and recite “No more ADHD, no more ADHD, no more ADHD” and be magically cured. But, I do want to be seen. I want to be perceived. I want to be able to retreat into quiet and darkness when I need to, fidget, stretch, and stim when I need to, be bold and assertive and silly when I need to, wear my noise-cancelling headphones and earplugs when I need to, cry when I need to, and ask to lower the lights and turn down the volume when I need to. I want my needs to be taken seriously and normalized. I want structures in place that make the world more accessible to me and others like me. I don’t want to be erased.

And, this acceptance is what I think Jesus does so well in his ministry. So many of us are told to hide or mask our disabilities. “Push through the pain.” “Don’t be a crybaby.” “Don’t ask for help.” “Don’t let others know how you feel.” “Don’t look weird.” “Don’t look weak.” But, Jesus rejected all of those ableist narratives back in Ancient Rome! Jesus gravitated towards the “crybabies,” the “weak,” the “sensitive,” the “pained,” the “disabled.” He opened himself to them, loved them for who they are, and *asked them*, “Brother, sister, sibling, what do you need?”

Jesus was willing to perceive them: he didn't ask them to hide, he didn't ask them to change. Remember the hemorrhaging woman in the synoptic gospels? The woman who has been suffering for over a decade with excessive bleeding who touches the hem of Jesus's clothes? His sense of perception is so good: he sensed the woman needed his help just by the touch of her hand on his hem, before even seeing her.

He asked them what they needed from him, and he accepted them—the demon-possessed, the epileptic, the paralyzed—all. Jesus's response to disability was accommodation—accommodation suggested by the disabled people themselves. Now, the question still remains: if Jesus was accommodating them, why did many of the disabled and sick folks who came to Jesus ask for healing? Well, maybe that's what they needed. Even though St. Hildegard and I wouldn't necessarily choose to be healed from our "visions," perhaps a Christ-follower or member of Christ's early community would have. One of my great friends, Maggie Clark, a seminarian at Wake Forest, recently preached on this topic at Green Street United Methodist Church in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Maggie is ADHD and Autistic, and she is also a Christ-follower training to become ordained. She preached on John 9, often called "Jesus Heals the Blind Man," and interprets this scene as Jesus calling us and his disciples to reimagine a world where not only the man receives accommodations but, also, heals the world into non-ableism. Perhaps the hemorrhaging woman reaching out to Jesus's hem, the blind man, and the paralyzed man who is lowered through the roof of his house chose to come to Jesus, to be seen by Jesus, to receive the touch of his healing love and divine power. But, maybe Jesus came across folks who asked, instead, for a different, more embracing world or a mobility aid that would better support needs better.

We are a tradition that believes in Jesus's radical message of loving-kindness, inclusivity, and empowerment of the meek and the oppressed. And, also, we are a tradition that believes in Christ. We believe in the power of Christ's healing touch, we believe in how the Spirit calls us to pray, to bless, to reach out to our fellow neighbors and lay hands upon them, especially to those

who are hurting, broken, and sick. Jesus the man and Jesus the Messiah responded to his disabled community with trust, humanity, healing touch, and an unflinching willingness to perceive.

In the Spirit of Jesus, in the Spirit of Christ, we will lay hands on each other later on in this service. During this time, and when we leave this space, may God's love, Christ's peace, and the Spirit's comfort flow through us, in us, and beyond us to each other. May we remember St. Hildegard, a powerful, mystical, Spirit-led, and disabled woman of God whose visions continue to teach us one-thousand years after her death. May we walk in the ways of Jesus, where loving perception guides us to the path of liberation and the healing we long to have, St. Hildegard longed to have, and Jesus longs to have for ourselves, each other, and in this world. Amen.