

Sermon: Three Incarnations**Scripture: Advent Scriptures and Hildegard's "Ignea Vis"****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: December 15, 2024**

At Christmas we speak of the incarnation of God, the entering into flesh of deity, the spaciousness of light entering the density of flesh, the immaterial Spirit putting on the material body. But you might consider that in the frame of the Christian faith there isn't just one incarnation but there are three. It's the second incarnation that is through Mary's body, Jesus come as a babe to Bethlehem on a silent night, holy night which we'll celebrate in about 10 days. But it is said by some theologians, there was a first incarnation of Divine enfleshment and that was into creation itself and the remarkable figure of Hildegard of Bingen invites us there in a powerful and beautiful way.

If you are surprised in having read Jane's liner notes this morning that you didn't know more about Hildegard of Bingen given what a powerhouse figure she is in our Christian history, don't be. Our patriarchal tradition of course has privileged the thinking and the offerings of men over the ages, but these women are not to be silenced! Especially over the last decades, Hildegard's voice has re-emerged with the resurgence of creation-centered spirituality in Christianity, and Hildegard wrote and taught with a profound sense that the created world is sourced and infused and thrumming with the Divine. Her poetry, illuminations, theology, music is sensual and fiery and thoroughly embodied! She gives us language and visuals and sound for the First Incarnation which is God's essence becoming enfleshed in the

things of this world. For instance in Hildegard's poem that Branda just read she has God exuding power in this way:

I am the fiery life of divine substance
 I blaze over the beauty of the fields,
 and I shine in the waters,
 and burn in the sun, moon, and stars.

This is not an image of God separate, up there in a heavenly realm somewhere but the divine life manifested within the universe. We know this ourselves as true, of course! Ask most anyone where they last experienced God's presence and it most likely will not be - "O sitting in a stained-glass-windowed-church sanctuary separated from the outside world and listening to Will preach" - but rather "that full moon last night, did you see that?" Or "On the mountain top this fall with the colors surrounding me and the earth spread out below!" I had a text exchange this week with someone who had to leave a church meeting we were having on zoom because their dog was slaughtering a bunny out on his front lawn. I, being the compassionate vegetarian that I am responded "well it's a good thing there are a million of those things around" and he texted back - I got permission to quote him exactly - "Yeah, but it makes me cry every time. I look into the eyes of the rabbit and it hits my soul. We have nests in our yard and the adjoining neighbors, but it still makes me very sad, in spite of the fact the rabbits eat my vegetables, I still like them." What he refers to is the first incarnation of the divine that is in all living things and we being living things ourselves have a resonance with the divine fire that is there - deep calls to deep - is how the Psalmist speaks of it. In the eyes of the animals the divine is very very evident there, the fiery life of divine substance, the first incarnation.

Listen to more of how Hildegard speaks of it - “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. The word is living, being, spirit, all verdant greening, all creativity. All creation awakened, called by the resounding melody of God’s invocation of the word.” This 12th century woman we need to hear today more than ever in the face of our ecological crises! If only we had heard her over these ages maybe we would have avoided the tragic mistake of viewing the world as primarily mechanistic, a product to be used, bought and sold and us separate from it somehow. Hildegard’s theology and science even presents us as humans deeply integrated into creation itself. At one point in her writings she shouts - “The earth must not be injured, the earth must not be destroyed!” and warns that humanity’s sins of indifference and injustice to nature will cause hardships on us all, for she exclaims “creation demands JUSTICE!”¹ She was writing in the 12th century. It’s a shame we haven’t been listening.

Where did she get these prescient visions of the world? She would say she received them directly from God, Herself, in visions. You’ve been looking at one of Hildegard’s illuminations on the front of the bulletin and on the screens. (SLIDE) Hildegard did not paint these images but she dictated to an artist in her Abbey what came to her from her visions, with great detail and the artists painted them. They’re remarkable aren’t they? There are at least 21 of them and in her book that she wrote called Scivias she writes about each vision that is illuminated by the art. For this one you see before you she says - “all of creation is a symphony of joy and jubilation!”²

¹ Matthew Fox, Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen, p. 18

² Ibid. p. 75

Here's another one of the illuminations (SLIDE)³. She did not name them but the theologian Matthew Fox called this The Cosmic Wheel. These illuminations are supposed to be meditated upon, used in prayer but beware, people have talked about how these images after meditating on them show up in their dreams and the edges of their waking life! Hear what Hildegard says about this particular illumination:

“Out of the original source of the true Love in whose knowledge the cosmic wheel rests, there shines forth an exceedingly precise order over all things... It is Love which here properly distinguishes and moderately adapts the powers of the elements and of the lofty adornment associated with the strength and beauty of the world as well as with the entire physical structure of humanity... out of this true Love which is totally divine there arises all goodness which is to be desired above everything else. Love draws to itself all who desire God, and with this impulse Love goes out to meet them.”⁴

“And with this impulse Love goes out to meet them.” The first incarnation is the enfleshment of God in creation, God birthing creation, giving Her body for the sake of the other. And the 2nd incarnation is Love going out to meet them in Christ Jesus. Here is another illumination that has a reference to Christ's coming. (SLIDE)⁵

There is so much to each of these illuminations, that it's a shame not to spend much time unpacking each one but the one aspect of this image that I want to draw your attention to is the half circle at the bottom of the image which Hildegard says is an image of Mary's womb and out of it arises Jesus, the Christ, beckoned forth there by John the baptist, dark skin with white hair and beard, inviting Jesus into the darkness and sin of the

³ Ibid, p. 38

⁴ Ibid, p. 41

⁵ Ibid. p. 66

world. The second incarnation is God enfleshed as Jesus who comes not down from the heavens to enter the world but up from the depths, from the depths of a mother's womb, wet with amniotic fluid, greening and wetting the brown, brittle dry world as He comes! And this is what we call out for at advent, the greening of life through the coming of the Word.

And so what, you ask, is then the 3rd incarnation from the Christian frame? It's the incarnation of Christ's Holy Spirit into us, the people who follow him and make up his community, his church, the enfleshment of His spirit. Here is an illumination referencing this 3rd incarnation which Matthew Fox titles "Mother Wisdom, Mother Church"⁶. These are the words that Hildegard said God gave her with regard to this illumination -

"I saw a certain brightness white as snow and like transparent crystal lighting up the image of a woman. She was shining with a reddish gleam like the dawn from her throat to her breasts... and I heard a voice from heaven saying: 'This is the flowering of the celestial Zion, the mother and flower of roses and lilies of the valley. O Flowering, you will be betrothed to the son of the most powerful king.'⁷

This is reference to Mary but also the community of Christ betrothed to God through Christ. And she continues - "Here held in Wisdom's arms [the feminine aspect of Christ], these are the daughters of Sion and with them are the lyres and musicians who play them and every type of music and the voice of the perfect merriment and the joy of joys!"

May Hildegard's words and her music awaken us to the fiery divine substance in all creation and grant us an encounter with that fire this Advent season as we move closer to Christmas! Amen.

⁶ Ibid. p. 70

⁷ Ibid. P. 71-72