
Two Witnesses, One Heart: A Tribute to Hildegard of Bingen and Queen Elizabeth II

An Evensong meditation by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Feast of Hildegard of Bingen, observed, commemorating and giving thanks also for the life of Queen Elizabeth II

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart, find favor in Your sight, oh Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. Amen.

Hildegard of Bingen. Queen Elizabeth II. One, a 12th century prophet. The other, a modern queen. One, an antagonist, provocateur, artist, writer. One, the symbol of duty and service and unity. While it is not hard to see the presence of God in each of these two women, it's not clear they share a lot in common. Something I should have thought about before agreeing to preach. In fact, as I prayed with their lives, it dawned me that my wife seems to be inspired by one and my mother by another.

Hildegard, the 12th century prophet and saint was an amazing person. She was the tenth child of her family. And by virtue of that, was tithed to the church. She lived with an anchoress outside of a Benedictine monastery until, through her own growth and maturation, she wound up taking over that order and promptly moving it with all the dowries of the sisters. The monastery wasn't happy about that. It's a sign of things to come with Hildegard. She was one of the Rhineland mystics out of the rich Rhineland valley. And she was the grandmother, if you will, of Meister Eckhart and many other names that you might know. Deep, spiritual writers.

The best way to understand her, I think, is through a fourfold spiritual path. It starts with a positive embrace of God. Creation spirituality is what we call it now. Hildegard, when she was only four years old, began having visions. Visions of God's presence in creation. Light and sound and voice and wind, became fantastic and supernatural images for her. And out of that presence of God, she experienced great joy. And I think out of that great joy, great wisdom. But the creation spirituality that she experienced as a child, continued to influence her throughout her adult life and her whole vision of God. It was as if we were born, not as Augustine had said in the fourth century, "with some original sin," that made us lacking, but instead, an "original blessing," which made us alive and that drove her vision of God's presence in her life.

She wasn't without trial or tribulation of course. The second moment in her path would be a negative embrace, which is to say a standing back, a waiting, a silence. This period characterized not by light, but by darkness, by silence. This anticipated John of the Cross' *Dark Night of the Soul* by several 100 years. That's exactly what she's writing about. Maintaining faith, when God's presence seems so distant and absent. And yet out of that sense, out of the letting go of that moment, she becomes incredibly creative. And this is the third step on the path, this prolific creativity.

She was a musician. She wrote any number of songs and even an opera. She was said to have produced the first opera in the West. Another one not to come for another 500 years. And I read that she wrote breathtaking music. Which is to say, if you actually sang it, it would take your breath away, the range was so demanding. They said, "You either got high on God or you passed out." That's what it was like to sing her music, as if her fullness of life, her joy in being, didn't want to leave anything out. And because, of course, she was a musician, she then became a poet, because she wrote her own lyrics. And she also was a director because of course she staged these plays, utilizing her private secretaries and sisters as actors. I would make an allusion to William Shakespeare, but that would be reaching too far.

She was not only a musician, a poet. She was also a doctor of medicine. She researched the herbs and other cures that were there around her and wrote treatises on how they might be used as healing properties. And then if that wasn't enough, she is a preacher, she rode far and wide as a anointed preacher by the church. Not many prophets, get the church's blessing to go and preach and having read several of her sermons, I'm not sure how she did either. Because she was provocative. She spent most of her energy talking about how lazy priests are. I tried to discard most of those sermons.

But really what she was doing is calling the church back to the vibrancy of life that she thought the presence of God demanded. And she was calling out those who were neglecting their duties or the poor or the marginalized. Constantly challenging those in power. She counseled kings and queens and popes and archbishops. And I don't think she actually approved of what any of them was doing. And yet they listened to her, over and over again. I can only conclude it's because she was speaking the truth. This was her creativity. The fourth stage on the path is simply transformation. Having been rooted in this light, having experienced the dark night of the soul, having engaged in such widespread creative endeavors, she was transformed, as were those around her, drawing closer to God. Drawing closer to God.

She was an amazing person.

Now, Queen Elizabeth was an amazing person too, but I can't see her doing any of the things that Hildegard was doing. It just doesn't seem fitting for a queen. Now I'm not going to recount all of the amazing accomplishments of Queen Elizabeth II, because smarter people than I have already done that. I do want to say something about her faith, because where I do see a similarity between Hildegard and Elizabeth, is in their deep trust in God's presence. A deep trust in God's presence.

Elizabeth, you will remember, became queen while she was on a trip to Kenya. And when she got back, she immediately put herself in a framework of her faith, asking for prayers so that she might rule in accordance with God's direction. Her coronation ceremony was, of course, an Anglican ceremony, but had an anointing in it where she was stripped of all of the markings of power and anointed with oil. And she later said that despite all of the jewels that were present there, it was the Bible that she received that was the most valuable gift.

And then there are the Christmas broadcasts. These were speeches that she gave every year at Christmas time, that she wrote herself. So if you look at the themes and those speeches, I think you can see something about her as she reveals her faith. And two things stand out to me. The first is her love of the parable of the Good Samaritan and her constant referencing of neighbor and what it means to love neighbor and how that story is a good analogy for what we need to be doing now. There's a sense of commitment to the greater good, that I think you can then see in all of the rest of her life. It wasn't just duty. It wasn't just service. It was a discipline to work for the greater good. That's what she dedicated her life to. But her ethic is rooted in the Good Samaritan.

The second theme, which seems to crop up in these Christmas broadcasts so often is forgiveness. And of course, you know her life, she had a lot of opportunities to forgive. Forgiveness, I think is really at its core, a sense that we have been forgiven and a commitment to embrace the goodness of others. A sense that we have been forgiven and a discipline and commitment to embrace the good in others. And it is here that I think I can see, and I hope you will too, how Hildegard of Bingen in the 12th century, with all her prophetic interfering and Elizabeth II, a modern queen, dedicated to service and the symbol of unity, how their faith gives them a common calling. Different context, different people, different times, but a common calling to serve the common good. To dedicate themselves to others, no matter how hard the task.

It is here, I think that we can give thanks for the model of these two women in whom the presence of God was so deeply and intimately felt and through whose lives we can see the presence of God shining, like the light. Not the light that we can see, but the light by which we see everything else. And there is joy there, all the joy of creation, because we know the presence of God surrounds us, thanks to them. Amen.