

Reading the Wise Men's journey inwardly with Hildegard of Bingen Be the womb. Become Bethlehem...

I would like to invite you this evening to read the wise men's journey as a journey of our souls.

"Be the womb. Become Bethlehem..." says Hildegard of Bingen, the medieval abbess.

She was a lover of wisdom, and she shows us ways of growing through wisdom. Hildegard was born as the last of ten children to a noble German family in 1098. Her parents offered Hildegard as a tithe to God and placed her in the monastery-like place of Jutta, a family friend, at the age of eight. Jutta taught Hildegard monastic disciplines, and after being joined by other women, they formed a nunnery that embraced the Benedictine Rule. After Jutta's death in 1136, Hildegard became the abbess of the convent.

In 1141, at the age of forty-three, Hildegard received a dramatic vision and a call "to cry out and write." Initially she had self-doubts, but she began to write down what she saw and what she heard and thought... After ten years of writing she completed a work called "Know the Ways" (Scivias).

Hildegard became not only a writer of spiritual things, she also wrote medical books, and composed more than 70 liturgical songs.

Hildegard was famous and sought for her wisdom and smart advice on matters ranging from theology to family counselling. Several hundreds of her letters written to abbesses, abbots, priests, kings, bishops, the Pope, and lay people survived.

Unafraid to speak out against injustice on any level in church and society, Hildegard had not only friends. Yet, she persisted in speaking, preaching and writing until the end of her life at the monastery which she had founded in Bingen.

Today I would like to look with you at Hildegard's interpretation of the wise men's journey.

We have come a long way from Christmas. Starting at the manger in a humble stable, we walked through desert and plains, pausing at the threshold between the years. We have begun the new year, and from here we come back one more time to the manger scene.

In her Christmas meditations Hildegard of Bingen invites us to translate the Epiphany story (when the three kings arrive at the manger, and mad King Herod fears the "newborn king" might get all the attention..., Matthew 2,1-12) into the soul's journey towards new life.

Without questioning the historic validity of the story Hildegard invites us here to read the text almost like a dream or a fairy tale, in order to unpack the rich symbolism, it

holds. The three kings, says Hildegard, symbolize the well-educated mind, filled with all sorts of worldly wisdom, power and knowledge.

But then a star in the East arises, just where the sun awakens, like a guide from beyond, from another world, pulling them on a journey towards their **"heart's knowledge."**

Following the promise of this star, led the wise men away from all the cherished stars (and values) they held before, even away from their own stardom (their homes and riches, their palaces, and their power).

This star "which went before them led them to "God's grace" swaddled in the clothes of an innocent child.

They found divine gifts in this little child, gifts which frighten rulers and threaten their worldly powers. The wise men's heart's knowledge enabled them to see the divine gifts and to follow the star.

When they found the "new king", surprised by the sight of a newborn - they rejoiced in this new wisdom which they had found.

"Their souls tasted heavenly things," says Hildegard.

Though arriving in Bethlehem at the scene of the birth the three seekers also arrive in that innermost "chamber," "where the sinner lets go of sins, and holiness arises," as Hildegard has it in her symbolic language.

Overcome by that very moment the wise men open their heart and offer their innermost riches: gold, the beginning of divine knowledge, frankincense, the becoming transparent to our shortcomings, myrrh, the deepening of the self.

So far Hildegard's thoughts.

Let me try to put this in our everyday 2021 context.

Hildegard calls us to see four aspects in the wise men's story.

I The Journey of the three kings - our inner pilgrimage

Hildegard helps us to see that we have, all along, already been traveling with the wise men on their journey. This is the journey of the heart cradling the hope of Christmas, the journey to the place where God's wisdom dwells, - away from what we considered urgent and important and towards the living light, who wants to dwell in us.

It is a journey from "dead" knowledge to "living" wisdom, when God's spirit becomes alive in the human heart.

II The little child - birthing hope and grace

So, who is the new king? A little tender child, symbol for peaceful innocence (or as the German theologian Paul Tillich has it: "dreaming innocence") cradled by Mary, mother of all wisdom.

There is no doubt in Hildegard's reading that this child is to be born in each of us, the spark of hope and peace, kindled by eternity.

This inner child is not childish, but offers childlike innocence, as when Jesus calls us to become childlike. Finding your inner child, as an adult, saves and heals us. Recognizing the little child, and God in the child, and the child we are ourselves, brings grace and hope into the hearts of all who seek a new way...

III The evil king Herod - the shadow self's deceptions

We know exactly who that evil king Herod is, who plays nice to the faithful just to trick them into worshipping him instead of the godly child. We know exactly what that proud man looks like, killing the innocent children of the land. The story translates so easily into our world today.

But this is not where Hildegard's interpretation is leading us. Hildegard works in the long monastic tradition of inner movements. They can transform us and make us grow.

So sorry to say, Hildegard interprets that Herod is within us, too. We might understand him as the shadow or false self, the deceptive part of the ego who does not want to let go of its own importance, and by doing so silencing any divine spark calling to us to new life.

IV To Bethlehem - our heart's heart

The wise men's journey to Bethlehem becomes our inner pilgrimage to our heart's heart. It clears us of all excess baggage and ballast, and lets us see who we really are, or who we could be, or who God wants us to be.

It is, so Hildegard, here where we find our true self, not as something waiting to be picked up, to be possessed and held fast, but as something that travels with us and makes our hearts maturing on the way... We see who we are, as we journey through life, through a life with God who we met in the baby in the manger, and who lets us find the divine as the most precious purpose of our lives.

Our journey from Christmas on does not come in pre-packed wisdom bits and pieces, but instead becomes a constant gathering up, a process, a walking, and deepening every year anew - guided by a star from beyond...

Here is Hildegard's good news.

We are all Bethlehem.

We are all vessels of the God.

We are all Mary.

We are all the womb able to deliver the good news into our time.

We are also the wise men on the way.

At Christmas and beyond.

Amen.