Well, first of all, let me say Happy New Year to each of you. It’s so good to be with you and I hope the Christmas holiday and the New Year’s holiday have been good for you and your family, and I’m glad now to turn our attention to this series of sermons I want to share during the month of January titled – “Mystics, Poets and Madmen.” And today I start with a mad woman – Hildegard of Bingen, a woman who lived in the 12th century and was a significant figure in the Medieval Church. And by the way, I use this expression “madwoman” with great affection, because what I mean is that she was a woman in touch with a wild, wonderful, spiritual energy, the kind of energy many of us neglect because we’re either too busy or just too unconscious to pay attention to it.

I’ll get to Hildegard in a minute, but I want to tell you why I think this series of sermons is important. I happen to believe that every human being is a mystic, just as I think every human being is religious. Now, you may not think of yourself as a mystic, but let me ask you a few questions this morning . . .

Have you ever had a feeling of awe or wonder while sitting inside this church, listening to music or watching candles flicker at the altar? If so, you’re a mystic.

Have you ever been inspired by the beauty of a mountain or ocean or desert? So much so that you felt overwhelmed by the beauty of the moment and deeply connected to all of creation? If so, you’re a mystic.

Have you ever had a strong connection with another person, one that transcended just physical touch or sight, and that to be with that person touched some of the deepest chords within your being? If so, you’re a mystic.

There is a time and place to think about theology and beliefs and the practices of the church. There is a time and place to ask rational questions about religious ideas and experiences. And I love that part of faith. There is a time and place to address issues of injustice in our society. But there is also a time and place to honor the deeper feelings and connections and mysteries of living, and that is what religion is all about. Every great world religion has a mystical tradition in it, and the reason for that is simple: God is the word we use to name the greatest depth of meaning within our human experience. And so to be a mystic means you are willing to pay attention to the depth of your humanity.

Here’s an image for you: You can stand at the beach and look out upon a glistening ocean. It’s beautiful. We all love it. But what we also know is that under that ocean there are currents of water, rivers that flow under the ocean. Mysticism isn’t just looking at the ocean; mysticism is our capacity to be in touch with the rivers under the sea. Thus, to be a mystic means you are paying attention to the deeper currents of life.

Let’s look at our reading today. It focuses on the idea that “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God . . .” We sometimes say that the Bible is the Word of
God. Well, the truth is the Word of God is much bigger than the Bible. And the Word of God is even bigger than Jesus. The Word is bigger than the Church. The Word, the big W Word, is this animating presence of the divine that is in all things and above all things and flows through all things. I know this is conceptual and philosophical, but this is a really important idea. And some people, such as this Medieval mystic by the name of Hildegard of Bingen, honored this living Word so intensely that she can still be a guide for us centuries later.

A few things to know about Hildegard, and I'll start with the obvious . . . she was a woman. Yes, culturally speaking, the church had been dominated by men. The Roman Catholic Church still has not come to grips with the gifts women can bring to the ministry of faith communities. But even in a male-dominated Church, there have been so many women who have brought their enormous insights and creativity to the world. Hildegard is one of those women. This is a woman who wrote amazing music. She created beautiful paintings, including painting mandalas or these circular images that people would use as a source of prayer and meditation. She wrote books on theology, even though she was not allowed to be a priest. Yes, she was a theologian. She was an abbess and administrated an entire community of nuns, which I'm guessing requires a good bit of talent and insight. She wrote poetry. She even wrote a book about rocks, and she did that because she understood that the natural world can lead us to the mystery of God and the mystery of God can lead us back to the natural world. I'm sharing this with you as an introduction, because this is one of the most remarkable people in the history of Christianity.

So, let me give you a sample of her mysticism with a few selected quotes . . . listen to this song she wrote . . .

I, the fiery life of divine wisdom,
I ignite the beauty of the plains,
I sparkle the waters,
I burn in the sun, and the moon, and the stars.
With wisdom I order all rightly.

I adorn all the earth.
I am the breeze that nurtures all things green.

I am the rain coming from the dew,
That causes the grasses to laugh with the joy of life.
I call forth tears, the aroma of holy work.
I am the yearning for good.

You hear these words and begin to feel her expansive view of God and the natural world. Here's the thing that is true of mystics. And if you get nothing else out of these sermons during the month of January, at least get this . . . God is not just a Being up there or out there. Like a great uncle that lives in Minnesota. That's not it. God is the word mystics use to describe this expansive reality of meaning and truth and beauty, that is at once closer to us than our own fingernails but which also dances among the stars of the Milky Way. That's the God of mystics.

Every now and then people ask me: Do you believe in a God? And my answer is not meant to be confusing, but I always say: I don't believe in a God; I believe in God, I believe there is an expansive ground of being that fills every cell of every living thing and I believe there is a presence or energy that lives within every person and I believe if we will but pay attention to ordinary life an
extraordinary presence can be discovered. And I think that’s what Hildegard is pointing us toward this morning.

This is why she would say, “We can know God in every living creature.” Think about how that changes your view of life, if you can find God in every living creature. If you don’t think it’s true, all you need to do is come to our Blessing of the Animals service in October. People find in their animals this presence that is wild and gentle and beautiful. It’s God. And it’s why animals bring us so much joy when we are with them. And it’s why we grieve so much when we have to say good-bye to them. God fills every living cell.

Again, this is why Hildegard would say, “Without the Word of God no creature has meaning.” Again, she’s using the Word of God as if it means life force, energy force, animating presence of life that flows in all things. This is why we feel connected when we touch the mane of a horse or stare into its beautiful eyes or we hold a little field mouse in our hands. It’s life. It’s beauty. And it’s part of a larger fabric of existence that is held together by the living Word of God. It’s also why when we are with people in a real and meaningful way, not only do we see them, we begin to see the face of God. Mystics know what most of us intuit, namely, that if we are in touch with nature, we are in touch with the divine.

One of my favorite quotes by Hildegard goes like this: “There is no animal without the radiance of God.” Why would she say that? Well, it’s because mystics see the presence of God in all things. They also see that everything is connected to everything else. They also see that there is no moment too small for the divine presence. That’s how mystics think and feel and see the world. And it’s why we need mystics.

It’s interesting to me that, in a way, science is now proving the truth of mysticism. Because scientists are telling us that the pesticides we are putting on our fruit trees are now damaging colonies of bees all around the world. Bees are connected to fruit, and if you don’t have bees, you don’t have fruit. And the pesticides that run off in rainwater and are flushed out to the sea are now damaging little things like clams and oysters and scallops. All things are connected; and that’s not just good science; it’s a mystical awareness that is becoming more and more essential to our living.

Now, because today is Communion Sunday, let me offer this thought . . . Communion is invisible . . . you can have bread and wine but not have Communion. You can just eat. Chew. Swallow. Digest. But true Communion is a deeper, invisible, mystical connection of love that people experience with one another. Now, there are all kinds of communions. I suppose a tailgate party is a kind of communion. A wedding reception is a kind of communion. A family dinner is a kind of communion. Regardless of the context, communion takes ordinary food and drink that we place upon a table, and we discover in it a spiritual meaning and value, and in the case of Sunday Communion, we experience nothing less than the presence of Jesus Christ. And Communion is always supposed to go two ways . . . we feel a depth connection with Jesus . . . in whom this living Word of God was animated in a clear and decisive way, but we also feel a connection with one another. That’s why it’s okay to look at one another as you walk up the aisle. That’s why it’s okay to smile at the person sitting next to you in the pew. I don’t care if you say “hi” to one another in our Communion line. Why? Because Communion is a reminder that you are connected to every human being, especially the ones with whom you commune on a Sunday morning. That’s an insight of mysticism.
Hildegard of Bingen. Medieval mystic. Woman of faith. Artist of the Spirit. Her presence is a testimony to the spiritual depth and creativity of women, and just knowing how she found the living Word of God in all things, is a reminder that there are many ways of seeing the world, including seeing the world through the eyes of a mystic. Here’s what I hope for you this year. I hope that each of us can be in touch with our inner mystic. That we can live a little deeper. That we can look beyond the surface. That we can honor the amazing connections that God is weaving in the world. If that could happen, then it will be a good year.

Friends, I love you. Let’s love one another. And let’s go into this New Year ready to see, really see, God in all things. Amen.