

Creative Spirituality: The Illustrated Word
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Lent 2 – March 13, 2022

Scripture: Psalm 119:10-32

Hymns: Voices Together 738 - Open My Eyes That I May See; VT 549 - Be Thou My Vision

Psalm 119:10-32, NRSV:

- ¹⁰ With my whole heart I seek you;
do not let me stray from your commandments.
- ¹¹ I treasure your word in my heart,
so that I may not sin against you.
- ¹² Blessed are you, O LORD;
teach me your statutes.
- ¹³ With my lips I declare
all the ordinances of your mouth.
- ¹⁴ I delight in the way of your decrees
as much as in all riches.
- ¹⁵ I will meditate on your precepts,
and fix my eyes on your ways.
- ¹⁶ I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word.
- ¹⁷ Deal bountifully with your servant,
so that I may live and observe your word.
- ¹⁸ Open my eyes, so that I may behold
wondrous things out of your law.
- ¹⁹ I live as an alien in the land;
do not hide your commandments from me.
- ²⁰ My soul is consumed with longing
for your ordinances at all times.
- ²¹ You rebuke the insolent, accursed ones,
who wander from your commandments;
- ²² take away from me their scorn and contempt,
for I have kept your decrees.
- ²³ Even though princes sit plotting against me,
your servant will meditate on your statutes.
- ²⁴ Your decrees are my delight,
they are my counselors.
- ²⁵ My soul clings to the dust;
revive me according to your word.
- ²⁶ When I told of my ways, you answered me;
teach me your statutes.
- ²⁷ Make me understand the way of your precepts,
and I will meditate on your wondrous works.

²⁸ My soul melts away for sorrow;
strengthen me according to your word.
²⁹ Put false ways far from me;
and graciously teach me your law.
³⁰ I have chosen the way of faithfulness;
I set your ordinances before me.
³¹ I cling to your decrees, O LORD;
let me not be put to shame.
³² I run the way of your commandments,
for you enlarge my understanding.

It was at the Winnipeg Art Gallery that I first encountered the *St. John's Bible*. Written by hand in calligraphy using quills made from turkey, swan, and goose feathers on calfskin pages; illustrated or illuminated using Chinese inks and real gold leaf, this completely handmade copy of the entire Bible – all 1,127 pages of it – took 23 artists and 6 calligraphers 15 years to complete. Of course, this isn't the only copy of the Bible to be made this way; we have multiple medieval manuscripts of the Bible, many very beautiful. So what's the big deal about this one? Well, it was completed in the year 2006. That's right – it's the first handwritten and illuminated Bible to be made in 500 years, since the printing press was invented. St. John's Abbey and University in Collegeville, Minnesota, commissioned it in 1995 from British calligrapher Donald Jackson, who became the project's artistic director.¹

It was a massive undertaking, as you might guess, especially since they followed historic methods of writing with quills on calfskin, with the beautiful illuminations made with Chinese inks from the 1800s mixed with egg, and delicate gold leaf work. It might seem a little over the top to undertake such a painstaking project in the age not only of printing presses but of computers! But those who had a hand in creating it, who gave

¹ For a video introduction to the *St. John's Bible*, see:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_DbgZUK26g&ab_channel=WHYY

many hours to its planning and creation, saw it as very much inspired by their faith – both the artists and calligraphers and the Benedictine Abbey and University that commissioned it. So, in keeping with our worship series on Creative Spirituality, I want to focus today on the writing and reading of illuminated Bibles not only as the enjoyment of beauty and art, but as a spiritual practice.

Scribes and Illuminators:

With my whole heart I seek you;
do not let me stray from your commandments.
¹¹ I treasure your word in my heart,
so that I may not sin against you.
¹² Blessed are you, O LORD;
teach me your statutes.
¹³ With my lips I declare
all the ordinances of your mouth.
¹⁴ I delight in the way of your decrees
as much as in all riches.
¹⁵ I will meditate on your precepts,
and fix my eyes on your ways.
¹⁶ I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word. (Psalm 119:10-16)

Different generations will have different amounts of experience with handwriting. I know that for me personally, I couldn't imagine having to rely on a typewriter for my sermons, never mind writing them out on pen and paper! Writing out any book, never mind the Bible, with its over a thousand pages, would be incredibly time consuming. Add to this, it has to be legible and in beautiful calligraphy and oh, yes, you can't even use a ball-point pen! There is a reason that the work of writing out medieval manuscripts was reserved for monks. They had the time, alongside their other responsibilities, since they also "attended chapel up to eight times a day" and "took turns in other tasks around the monastery's school, kitchen, guest house, or garden." In this part-time way, a medieval

monk might complete three or four medium-sized books a year.² But even they didn't enjoy every minute of it. Many medieval manuscripts contain a note at the end expressing great relief at having finished the task!³ This is why the *St. John's Bible's* artistic director Donald Jackson proclaims that "The Bible is the calligraphic artist's supreme challenge (our Sistine Chapel), a daunting task."⁴

But the slow, methodical work of calligraphy and illumination was also considered a spiritual practice, a form of meditation on a sacred text; a variation on what we might call Bible study. With the Psalmist, these scribes would say, "I will meditate on your precepts, and fix my eyes on your ways. / I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word." Donald Jackson speaks of encountering God in the process of creating the *St. John's Bible*: "The continuous process of remaining open and accepting of what may reveal itself through hand and heart on a crafted page is the closest I have ever come to God."⁵ Through each dip in the ink, each careful stroke of the quill, the calligrapher is immersed in the Word of God, bringing forth a sacred text letter by letter, word by word.

We may be somewhat less familiar – perhaps even less comfortable, as iconoclastic Mennonites with a history of unadorned sanctuaries – with the visual art of illumination, as the painted biblical illustrations are called. But they are also full of symbolism and theology. As the name suggests, they are meant to "illuminate" or bring clarity to the text, like the shining of a light. Benedictine Michael Patella describes the art of the *St. John's Bible* this way: "The illuminations are not illustrations. They are spiritual meditations on a text. It is a very Benedictine approach to Scriptures."⁶ At the

² Christopher De Hamel, *Scribes and Illuminators* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2004), 7.

³ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴ <https://saintjohnsbible.org/Process/Dream>

⁵ <https://saintjohnsbible.org/Process/Index>

⁶ <https://saintjohnsbible.org/Process/Principles>

very start of the project of creating the modern-day manuscript, the group envisioned each illumination as something that “takes the Word of God and glorifies it by transforming the Word into a complementary art form employing illustration, color and design. *The Saint John's Bible* is meant to be a prophetic witness to the glory of the Word of God and to humankind’s God-given dignity.”⁷ So words and images together come from meditative, spiritual practice – time spent co-creating with God. And once complete, they are to point to God, to witness to God’s glory, and to invite readers into the biblical text.

Readers of the Word

¹⁸ Open my eyes, so that I may behold

wondrous things out of your law.

¹⁹ I live as an alien in the land; do not hide your commandments from me. ...

²⁴ Your decrees are my delight, they are my counselors.

(Psalm 119:18-19, 24)

In medieval times, wealthy families would commission a Book of Hours for their families – books of prayer and Scripture selections, for the purpose of praying the Hours, perhaps even in their own private chapel. Sometimes these books would depict the families in prayer within the illuminations in these Books of Hours, encountering God, Christ, and other



⁷ https://saintjohnsbible.org/Process/Principles_Vision

holy persons as they worship.⁸ These books therefore depict their goal – to facilitate worship and nourish spirituality, to bring these families into the presence of the Divine.

In a much less individualistic way, the *St. John's Bible* continues in this tradition of inviting people into communion with God. Before the project had even begun, the planners set the goal of “ignit[ing] the spiritual imagination of believers throughout the world.”⁹ They describe the “text and illuminations of *The Saint John's Bible* [as] encourage[ing] us to take our time—to live with the images and words.”¹⁰ Based on [Benedict's Rule](#), which “instructs the reader to “listen ... with the ear of your heart,” the monks of the monastery articulate a “hope that the Scriptures will open up to you and that your journey to see the Bible will become a journey toward God.”¹¹

In this spirit of hospitality – also a central aspect of Benedictine life – the *St. John's Bible* was created in such a way as to bring the contemporary world into conversation with the ancient text of the Bible. People are invited to see our world reflected in three things in particular:

1. **Their choice of translation of the Bible.** They use the NRSV because of its inclusive theology and its ecumenical appeal – as the translation of the Bible “officially authorized for use by most Christian Churches: Protestant, Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox.”¹² So even the translation was chosen for the sake of unity.
2. **The depiction of the Divine.** The illuminations show God in a diversity of ways, some abstract (rainbows, gold leaf) and some more familiar (Jesus as

⁸ Christopher De Hamel, *Scribes and Illuminators*, 47.

⁹ https://saintjohnsbible.org/Process/Principles_Vision

¹⁰ https://saintjohnsbible.org/Process/Production_Reproduction

¹¹ <https://saintjohnsbible.org/See/Index>

¹² https://saintjohnsbible.org/Process/Principles_Bible

a human figure).¹³ Gone is the old, bearded man in the clouds of the medieval imagination!



The seven days of Creation from the *St. John's Bible*.

3. Contemporary imagery.

Signs and symbols of our times, including scientific imagery, is incorporated into the illuminations. For example, "Strands of DNA are woven into the illumination of the 'Genealogy of Christ.' ... Satellite photos of the Ganges River Delta and photos from the Hubble telescope were used to depict Creation. In Acts, 'To the Ends of the Earth' includes the first vision of earth as seen from space in a hand-written Bible." In incorporating these very modern images, they invite us to ask ourselves, "What do you see?"¹⁴

- ²⁵ My soul clings to the dust;
revive me according to your word.
²⁸ My soul melts away for sorrow;
strengthen me according to your word.
³¹ I cling to your decrees, O LORD;
let me not be put to shame.
³² I run the way of your commandments,
for you enlarge my understanding. (Ps. 119:25, 28, 31-32)

¹³ https://saintjohnsbible.org/Process/Principles_Bible

¹⁴ https://saintjohnsbible.org/Process/Principles_Bible

As we continue on this Lenten journey, the sorrows we carry are those that have accumulated over two long years. We may feel that we are “clinging to dust,” that our souls are “melting away for sorrow” as we grieve the injustice and war and loss around us. But these beautiful, lovingly handwritten Bibles like the *St. John’s Bible* remind us that God’s word “revives us” and “strengthens us.” Meditating on these ancient words that have comforted and sustained people through all kinds of circumstances enlarges our understanding of the power of hope to turn sorrow into delight. It illuminates for us with exquisite loveliness that God is and will be with us always. AMEN