

January 10, 2021 – Rev Judy Steers

I want to invite you today to join me into a contemplation of a painting.

It's not just any painting. It is one of 160 paintings, or rather, 'illuminations' that were completed about 12 years ago, as part of a magnificent work called The Saint John's Bible.



It was commissioned in 1998 by Saint John's Abbey and University – a Benedictine Monastery in Collegeville, Minnesota. It was completed in late 2011. Some of you may be familiar with it, or may have visited an exhibition of works a couple of years ago. This extraordinary work is a completely handwritten, hand-illuminated Bible – the first handwritten Bible commissioned by a Benedictine Monastery in 500 years. Very few handwritten Bibles have been created since the invention of the printing press.

It is 1,150 pages of vellum roughly two feet tall and about three feet wide when open, with 160 illuminations throughout, divided into seven volumes and bound between boards of Welsh oak.

So, it is not only the words of scripture, but also illumination of the text for the 21st Century. It was not intended to be a museum piece, but rather, it was meant to inspire people to see and read anew the inspiration of scripture. One of the members of the creative team said ““The illuminations are not illustrations. They are spiritual meditations on a text.”

One of the main goals of The Saint John's Bible is to inspire and cultivate creativity, and to encourage people to engage with scripture in new ways. It wasn't about taking classical interpretations of scripture and recreating those as static images, but to completely reimagine how the text interacts with another two or three thousand years of human knowledge, exploration and creativity. So, the illuminations include images like fossils, fractals, dna strands and reproductions of Neolithic cave paintings.

The project also stimulates the ethical imagination of its readers and viewers on matters of justice for women, care for creation, and interfaith and intercultural dialogue.

One of the aspect about The Saint John's Bible that particularly struck me is that many of these mistakes were not scratched out – which is hard to do anyway when working on vellum - but incorporated into the manuscript in inventive ways: a bee hoisting a line of misplaced text into place with a pulley system, a dove bearing a verse to its correct place in the text, a lemur holding up words. There is a spiritual meaning in these mistakes. The artists applied creativity

and whimsy so that mistakes are not eyesores, but closely sought flights of fancy. They remind us of God's grace and love; grace that allows us to turn mistakes into beauty, and transforms our errors into things that lighten our hearts instead of judging or condemning us. Meaning is not only in the product, but is also in the process.



Donald Jackson with contributions from Chris Tomlin.
Genesis Frontispiece: Creation. (Genesis 1:1-2:3)

Inspired by today's scripture, and the act of Creation of worlds spoken into being by a word, let us turn to the very first page and especially the illumination on it. Being online is a new gift to us – it allows us to bring you illuminations for visual contemplation, as well as good words to ponder.

I will tell you a little bit about this illumination, and some of the details in it but not too much – I want you to go and look at the image yourself, as

a visual inspiration and contemplation as we embark on new beginnings this new year. You can easily find it online, and there is a link below.



Donald Jackson with contributions from Chris Tomlin.
Genesis Frontispiece: Creation.
(Genesis 1:1-2:3)

The structure of this illumination reflects the seven-day progression of the Bible's Creation story, with seven vertical strips, one for each day. This opening illumination uses gold throughout to symbolize God's intervention in the chaos and his ordering of the universe and its elements. You'll see as you look closely, a series of gold squares that mark each of the acts of creation.

The symbolism of creation still stands, only now we have a better understanding of it through science, anthropology and our knowledge of prehistory



Detail - Genesis Frontispiece: Creation.

On the first day, fragmented undefined shapes express the idea of chaos, look closely and you'll see this expressed by the Hebrew words "tohu wabohu" (meaning chaos, emptiness, void, nothingness, desolation).

A vertical gold line marks the moment in the story when God said, "Let there be light."

We sometimes think of that moment as perhaps an enormous explosion of light, a moment of 'nothing' then 'everything' and yet here it is represented by a tiny, almost imperceptible gold line, a moment, a turning point, or perhaps the opening up of potential, or possibility. And notice - Chaos does not abruptly end in that moment. Scripture tells us that the spirit of God hovered over the chaos. A good thing to

remember when our lives feel chaotic – God still dwells deeply within chaos, and brings life and possibility out of it.

The waters of creation are cloud, ice and ocean and the third day uses a satellite picture of the Nile Delta, a place where the lines between land and water blur, and create richness and life and the beginnings of vegetation.



Detail - Genesis Frontispiece: Creation.

The fourth day, creation of the sun, moon and stars and the lines of orbit or moon phases are reminiscent to me of the words "galaxies, suns, planets in their courses" from a Eucharistic prayer in the Book of Alternative Services. There is movement implied in the art of that fourth day.

Look at the sixth day – the creation of human beings. This is represented by images from actual aboriginal rock paintings in Nigeria and Western Australia. The snake curling through the bottom of the panel hints of the rift in relationship spoken of in the story of the Garden of Eden.

The golden seventh day is given over entirely to the contemplation of the spirit and Creator. The raven flying across the whole composition is associated with the mythology of Saint Benedict, Benedict shared bread with him as his companion, and the raven in turn protected him. But that's another story for another time.



I bring you this today as we hear the words of the beginning of the Creation story, and invite you to contemplate them more deeply. As we turn to another year, and are beset the clamour of much chaos in our world let us remember that God our Creator moves even within the chaos, to redeem our failures, to draw us towards those glimpses of light, to remind us that our story is bigger than just this moment in time.

Donald Jackson, calligrapher and artistic director of The Saint John's Bible project, said "The continuous process of remaining open and accepting of what may reveal itself through hand and heart is the closest I have ever come to God." May it be so for us this year as we journey together.

I invite you to further explore the theology and story of the Saint John Bible in these two videos:

The Saint John Bible

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dt4AeidkDyc>

The Calligrapher

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DrFFVpRnOqY>

To see the "Creation" image:

<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/stjohnsbible/stjohns-exhibit.html>

and click on the image of Creation to expand it in a pop up window

Credits:

Donald Jackson with contributions from Chris Tomlin. *Genesis Frontispiece: Creation*. (Genesis 1:1-2:3) (1) [Digital ID# itw0001]. The Saint John's Bible.