

Crossroads: Episode 36

Illuminating the Word of God: Inside the Cathedral's Saint John's Bible

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

What do we find at the intersection of faith and the world? The Cathedral's podcast, Crossroads, explores this question in thought provoking, bi-monthly episodes featuring guests from around the world who are seeking to live faithfully in the public square. This is a safe space for tough questions around faith, politics, technology and our responsibilities as citizens. So pull up a chair and meet us as we search for a better way forward.

Welcome to Crossroads, where we discuss the intersection of sacred and civic. I'm your host, Jo Nygard Owens. Today, you all are in for a treat as we talk with the Reverend Doctor John Ross, executive director of the Saint John's Bible Heritage Program. And we'll learn more about this stunning 21st century illuminated manuscript. Stay tuned to the end of the episode, or check our show notes to find out how you can bring the Saint John's Bible to your community.

Welcome, John. It is so good to have you with us today.

The Rev. Dr. John Ross

Thank you. It's wonderful to be here.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Tell us where you're joining from.

The Rev. Dr. John Ross

Well, I am in Excelsior, Minnesota, which is a western suburb of the Twin Cities. And about an hour and 15 minutes from Saint John's University and Abbey, which is the birthplace of the Saint John's Bible.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Okay. Fascinating. I am joining from my home studio in Cleveland, Ohio, and we have other folks who are behind the scenes on the podcast from Washington, D.C. and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. So we're covering all sorts of places today.

The Rev. Dr. John Ross

Terrific.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

But you are here with us from the Saint John's Bible. So tell us, for our listeners who might not have heard of the Saint John's Bible, both what it is and a brief explanation of how it came to be.

The Rev. Dr. John Ross

Well, the Saint John's Bible, simply put, is the first handwritten, illuminated, monumental Bible commissioned by a Benedictine abbey in over 500 years. As you would imagine, not very many people are handwriting the Bible since the advent of the printing press. But it was a long standing tradition in the Benedictine charism to commissioned artists to handwrite the Bible and to illuminate it for a world lit only by fire.

Gold and silver embossed on a page or applied to a page would create quite the effect. In medieval times. But as I say, with the advent of the printing press, the art form and the experience of scripture in this form really went away. Until in 1995, a gentleman by the name of Donald Jackson pitched the idea to, Father Eric Hollis, who is now the prior at Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, pitched the idea that the monks at Saint John's Abbey and the leaders at Saint John's University would commission him to do something he'd been dreaming about since he was ten years old, which was to handwrite the whole Bible.

Obviously, this was a unique individual. Donald is to this day alive and well in Wales, but has his whole life been a calligrapher and artist nearly 50 years as the scribe to the Queen of England, the most famous woman in the world for a long, long time. And he pitched the idea to the Abbey. It was his idea.

They spent a few years praying about it, imagining how they could, you know, pay for it and get it done. And then work began on Ash Wednesday of the year 2000 with the words in the beginning. Took 23 artists total. Donald couldn't do the work all by himself. It's just too, too much. Took 23 artists 15 years to create 1150 handwritten pages, including 160 original illuminations.

Illuminations are those pieces of art that include precious metals. And it was ultimately decided to commission him not only to celebrate the tradition within the Benedictine charism, but also to mark the new millennium and to celebrate that 150 years, that the monks had been there in Collegeville, Minnesota, very briefly, about halfway through, they realized that they couldn't fulfill their mission if they only had the one original manuscript.

So they actually commissioned Donald Jackson a second time to create what is called the Heritage Edition, or the apostles edition, which they have there at the Cathedral. That took five more years to figure out how to do this, so that it was a full scale, fully illuminated reproduction of the original. And they only made 299 sets of the Heritage edition, and only 12 sets of the apostles' edition.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

It is just astounding, and thankfully we have plenty of time for more questions. So I have questions. Yeah. So you imagine the Cathedral has an apostles' edition of the Saint John's Bible, and it was dedicated in 2023. For those who visit the Cathedral, it is housed in our Virginia may center and has a lovely display case where you can see it.

We have reference books in the library there, but what makes the apostles edition different from other versions? And what other special places have an apostles' edition?

The Rev. Dr. John Ross

Well, the apostles' edition, from a content standpoint, from the script and the illuminations is identical to the heritage edition because it's a reproduction of the original manuscript. The original manuscript, incidentally, is still unbound. It's on display 28 pages at a time in a gallery up on our campus in College Ville, Minnesota. The rest of it's in a vault because it's a priceless piece of sacred art.

The apostles' edition, unique to the heritage edition. You know, the inside is identical, but it's unique in that there are only 12 apostles and only 12 in existence in the world. So that's number one. Number two, it is bound differently, not only in terms of the color of the leather. It is bound by an artistic binder.

In the UK, the United Kingdom, of course, is globally known as sort of the home of manuscripts and, and book binding and book arts. So it is, uniquely bound in that way. The apostles' edition also comes with an original piece of art that is in the form of a dedication page that gets tipped into or inserted into the first of the seven volumes.

The dedication page there in Washington Cathedral includes a reference to our benefactors, Elaine and Bruce Culver and the Katherine Elizabeth Laney Trust. Remarkably generous and beautiful people. And then finally, the apostles' edition also comes with a companion heritage edition. So I guess technically you could call it a two for one or a buy one get one.

But that would diminish the full scale and value of it. But that heritage edition then can go to another institution at the choosing of the benefactors. And I believe that the companion said to yours, went to Sony, the University of the South.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Oh, wonderful.

The Rev. Dr. John Ross

Yeah, a nice connection there.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

That is.

The Rev. Dr. John Ross

You asked about the other locations. I can rattle that list off. Lambeth Palace Library has an apostles' edition, which we delivered and dedicated in November of 23. Of course, the Vatican Museum and Library. The Library of Congress received one when Pope Francis made his trip here in 2017, one was gifted in his honor.

The Whitney Museum in New York City has an apostles' edition. And last October, we delivered an apostles' edition to Saint Patrick's Cathedral in New York City in honor of, Cardinal Dolan. It was a gift to the Cathedral in his honor. The other one that is out in the world is in a private collection.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Wow. I feel very honored that we have, Heritage Edition among such notable places. So, yeah, it is indeed a treasure. All right. Getting into more of my questions here in the information on the website, it talks about having theologians design the illumination schema. Okay. What does illumination schema mean? And what was the process for the theologians to do this work?

But then how was it translated with the artist? I'm very curious about this whole process.

The Rev. Dr. John Ross

Yeah, that's a great question. And books have literally been written about that topic. So again, I have to be super concise. I, I'm going to leave a whole bunch of good stuff out, but briefly put the illumination schema or the schema for the Saint John's Bible was the

design for the whole thing from cover to cover. First of all, which translation would they use?

Right? And they went with the new Revised Standard Version to be as inclusive as possible. This is not a Catholic Bible. It was intended by these Benedictines to be a Bible for the 21st century, and for the whole world.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

I love that.

The Rev. Dr. John Ross

The schema chose also the passages that would be illuminated. There were 160 to be illuminated, and that was, the group Committee on Illumination and Text that wrote that schema chose the passages, and then one illumination at a time would write some theological briefs.

Now, the term brief doesn't really apply here because they were really long essays, these theologians, these scholars, these pastors in this Committee on illumination and text would get together. They would use lectio Divina to enter into the passage. They would then sort of have this free flowing, free association, and somebody would capture all the notes. We just wrote a beautiful story about that woman last month in our in our newsletter.

Linda would capture all the notes and then send those to the artists. Because the artists were artists, they weren't theologians or scholars or preachers or pastors. And then they would use it as that's spark that would, ignite their own imagination. About the passage that they were, you know, charged with, bringing to life on the page.

Not a bad time to mention that our mission has been from the start and is still today to ignite the spiritual imagination of people around the world of all faith journeys. And it really started with the dialog between that Committee on Illumination and text and the artists the committee was using words, and then the artists would use images and other forms of ignition to get our imaginations going.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

I'm curious about the art process itself. So when artists create icons of holy figures, we call it their writing the icons. And I was doing some research, and the American Association of Iconography say that icons are meant to be scripture in visual form. And

you talked a little bit about this, but would the artists consider the illuminations that they created to be writing, or is it more strictly on an artistic painting side, or somewhere in the middle?

The Rev. Dr. John Ross

Yeah, that's that is a great question. I'm always a little afraid to speak on behalf of the artists, and I would certainly never speak on behalf of my dear friend and my mentor, Donald Jackson. But I think the answer to that would be that it's yes, sort of. In other words, is it a visual interpretation? Yes. But I would say that it's even more so an invitation.

So there is interpretation happening is strictly like the word writing would imply from previous understandings of, of iconography, but this is more of an invitation than the way you experience the illumination that's hanging on your wall as an invitation to you on that day, in that moment, what does it mean to you? So it's not a static answer to a question or interpretation of a passage.

It is a dynamic, ongoing, ever renewing invitation to reflect on a very unique expression of God's Word.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

I love that, and I'm curious. So with icons say take, Saint Catherine of the wheel, we know that in every icon there's going to be a wheel, and there going to be other elements that help to identify her, or whichever saint that we're looking at. Are there artistic themes that run throughout the Saint John's Bible that we would begin to recognize as we flip through the pages?

The Rev. Dr. John Ross

Yeah, that's an awesome question. There is a consistent theme throughout the Saint John's Bible that is in the gold itself. You can probably guess from cover to cover what does gold and silver and these other precious metals in the Saint John's Bible represent or signify? Well, what divine? Of course, in this the divine and not just the divine, but the divine presence.

So from the very start on the first page, the creation illumination, shows the building blocks of creation in this mathematical design of seven and seven and each of those days and each of those steps is, is indicated with a small, polished gold square. And it's polished because they believe and we believe in the imago day. So if you're going to

portray God or the divine again and again and again, you're certainly not going to keep drawing some picture of an old guy with a big beard up in the clouds floating around.

And if you believe in the Imago Dei that we are created in God's image, then that polished gold, when you look at it, what do you see? Looking back.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Yourself?

The Rev. Dr. John Ross

Right, right. And as my good friend and colleague Tim Ternes likes to remind us, we not only see ourselves, but we see our best friend who's standing next to us, and we see God in that person. And then we see that the jerk that just cut us off on the highway over the other shoulder that we don't like.

But whether we like it or not, we see God in that person as well. You know, the people that we love and those that we don't understand and that inclusive spirit and that idea of unity across differences is a theme all throughout the Bible. But God's presence is that strand, that thread that goes all the way through.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

And that's beautiful. And just thinking, you know, in a mirror, we see our faces just as they are. But if we're looking in that reflection of gold, then we're transformed and everyone is transformed. And so we can see that presence of God within ourselves and others so much more clearly.

The Rev. Dr. John Ross

Yeah. That's right. And I think we also, in that same moment, recognize that that we're changing, that we are evolving and we are still growing and, you know, there's obviously different theological ideas about the Alpha and the Omega and God being the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. But there's also a strong understanding that God is still in a creative posture.

And as my tradition says, United Church of Christ, God is still speaking.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

I love that. One thing I love about the Saint John's Bible is how it's a beautiful example of ancient words and traditions. But being relevant in our modern time. So from the vellum

and the ink used in the original work, to the manufacturing of pages for the heritage editions and now so exciting. The new Turning the Pages program online.

The Bible represents just hundreds and hundreds of years in its creation and its technology and its expression and so how do the different technologies and how we work with them, how are they relevant for today and impact our understanding of Scripture?

The Rev. Dr. John Ross

I think it a very, straightforward and matter of fact way. All these things represent, the value of learning from and embracing our past. Right. We have these different technologies kind of all mixed up into this one final product, the technologies, you know, they used a computer to lay out the whole Saint John's Bible before they put a single quill to vellum, because they had to know where every page started and every page and it wow for multiple people to be working at the same time.

So, so it brings together these different times and technologies. But we have to learn from the past, and we have to embrace the past without trying to erase it or forget it. In some ways, I think it's also, you know, worth pointing out that the relevance comes by the incorporation of very contemporary images throughout the Saint John's Bible from the very first illumination, we were talking about creation or the very first illumination.

In Matthew's Gospel, for example, the genealogy of Jesus includes the image of the double helix DNA strand. That. Yeah, it's a beautiful like this was the first one Donald did, and he did it as a way to sort of pitch his idea. He created out of 42 generations of names, the first 17 passages of Matthew one. He created this beautiful family tree in the shape of a menorah, and then included all the names in English and in Hebrew.

And he included names that are in the passage, mostly women, to say everybody is in this picture, and then to be super clear at the very bottom next to Abraham, he put Sarah English in Hebrew. Then he also put Hagar, mother of Ishmael, in English, Hebrew and Arabic, to say, everybody's in this picture of God's family. And then the DNA was sort of the mic drop, right?

It was like it was like, if we're going to say that we believe everyone is in this picture, that everyone is included in God's family in ways we don't even understand. Then you throw the human DNA into that picture, and now we're all in it.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

That just brought tears to my eyes thinking about it. Oh my goodness, I need to go and look at that picture. So tell us I can go now and go to the Saint John's Bible website and go to the Turning the Page section of the website and actually go see that image.

The Rev. Dr. John Ross

Yeah. It's saintJohnsbible.org. Pretty simple and easy to remember. There's, in the little hamburger menu, the little drop down thing, it says, see the Bible. And that gives you multiple ways to see it. Like physically there's a locations map. So you can open this interactive map and zoom in on your town and see if there's one nearby and then go.

Or you can see it online. Now, this was just released a couple of weeks ago. Turning the pages is a fully interactive, the highly precise. I don't know how to say it. You can zoom in and you can see you can see hair follicles on the vellum. In this online version and turning the pages literally. Obviously, you can page through it.

Lots of the illuminations will have didactic sort of pop up, videos of the artist being interviewed, pictures of the process along the way. It is a fantastic experience. So the Saint John's Bible, and as I said it, it was just released a couple weeks ago and we're, really proud of it. But also, there's no replacing the actual book in your hands.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

No, no. But for those who might not get a chance to see it or want to prepare themselves and pick out what pages they hope to see in person. Yeah, the Cathedral's vicar, Dana Corsello, whenever she is leading a Bible study, she says, I don't want to see the Bible on your phone. I want you to bring an actual Bible because the interaction with the written word is so different on the page versus on the screen.

And then the Saint John's Bible is the next level. It forces you to pause and to reflect, rather than the scan or even a quick read. I mean, there's no way to just quickly go through the words the font, right? The illuminations, it draws you in and changes your pattern of breathing when you interact with it.

The Rev. Dr. John Ross

Well, and it was created communally, right? It was created in the context of a community, and it is best experienced that same way. I mean, we all need to have our own little private devotion Bible that can sit on our lap. But one of the uniqueness of the Saint John's Bible

is just a pure scale. It's two feet by three feet, and so it takes more than one person just to carry it around. And it takes more than one person to fully embrace it.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

That's beautiful. You have given so much to inspire us today. And I'm going to ask one more question. What hope does the Saint John's Bible bring to the world and those who behold it?

The Rev. Dr. John Ross

Yeah, that's a great question. The hope is one of my favorite theological topics to preach on over 30 years. And I will say that as it relates to the Saint John's Bible, there's a couple things. First of all, bringing hope to the world and the realization that we can still do big things. That is a big thing.

It represents something that makes no sense. Who in their right mind would spend millions of dollars to handwrite a Bible in the year? You know, in the early 2000s? It makes no sense. And it is such a great example of the faith and big faith that these Benedictine monks that I've come to know and love so very much.

The second thing I referenced earlier in the idea of hope is that we can find hope in the truth that God is still speaking, that in and through these very much alive illuminations and through the living Word, God is still speaking. And then finally that in a similar way, the spirit is still at work. Like sometimes we think that, you know, the work of the Holy Spirit is something only relegated to the past.

And these giant figures of the past. I think the spirit is still at work, you know, every day of our lives. And I often reflect now that this has become my life, I often reflect on the very first time I saw one of the pages of the original manuscript was in an exhibit in Phoenix. I was out there with my wife and some people from my church here in Minnesota who go away in the winters to warmer climates.

We went to see the exhibit. My friend Father Eric and my colleague Tim Ternes were the presenters that day. I'll never forget it. And when my wife and I were walking out to the car, I said to her, I said that the Saint John's Bible. That is the most remarkable collaboration between the human spirit and the Holy Spirit.

Like it couldn't have been done by just one or the other. It took both. And if we can do something like that, then I have to believe that there's very few things that we can't do.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Well, I'm going to come listen to your sermons any time you provide.

The Rev. Dr. John Ross

Not anymore, though.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

You just did. No, if preaching is inspiring, then then yes, you have inspired us through the Holy Word found in the Saint John's Bible. So thank you so much, John.

The Rev. Dr. John Ross

Well, you're very kind and it's just a delight. And it's fun for me to be doing this work. Now. I just, I love this mission and this ministry and the people I get to do it alongside with very much.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Thank you for joining us today. If you haven't seen the Saint John's Bible, I hope you'll go to their website, saintjohnsbible.org to experience the digital version. You can also find locations of the Bible around the world to go see it in person. And finally, you are invited to bring the Saint John's Bible to your community for free.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Visit saintjohnsbible.org/contact-us to connect with today's guest, John Ross. Join us next time as Dean Randy Hollerith sits down with the Reverend Terry Kylo to talk about the potluck project, which seeks to bridge bias and build understanding in communities, one potluck dinner at a time. Until next time, peace be with you.

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