

Episode 185 The Saint John's Bible

with John Ross

This transcript has been edited for clarity and space.

John Ross

I'm John Ross, Executive Director of the Heritage Program of the Saint John's Bible.

David Capes

Reverend Dr. John Ross, John, good to see you. Welcome to *The Stone Chapel Podcasts*.

John Ross

Great to be back here.

David Capes

Alright, so for those who don't know, John Ross, who is he?

John Ross

Well, John Ross is a retired pastor who retired way too young. I stepped into another career. But I spent 30 years as an ordained pastor in the United Church of Christ, the congregational tradition, where I served just two large churches in over 30 years. One was in Columbus, Ohio at the First Community Church, before I was called up to Minnesota, where I served as a senior minister at Wayzata Community Church for about 18 years. And not long after COVID cleared, I stepped into a different role. But all the way along, I was always a husband first, father second, and a minister third.

David Capes

Well, we're talking today about the Saint John's Bible project, which you've been a part of since, what 2022?

John Ross

I came on at the end of 2021. I've had a little over two years now in my current role, but I've been around the project for more than a decade now.

David Capes

You had a copy at your church in Minnesota. And we're going to talk a little bit more about that later on. Again, for those who haven't heard about it, or seen it, what is the Saint John's Bible?

John Ross

The Saint John's Bible is the first handwritten, hand illuminated Bible in over 500 years to be commissioned by a Benedictine abbey. Put as simply as I can, that's what it is and that's a short introduction to a very long and complex story.

David Capes

There are artists involved. There are scholars involved. There have been so many people involved in this over a number of continents.

John Ross

Exactly right. It was a transatlantic effort.

David Capes

If somebody were to see it, what would they see today? We're so much better off today than in centuries past because we have printed editions of the Bible. And there's something beautiful and wonderful about the ability to easily disseminate scripture. But handwritten, hand illuminated. This is how it was done in the Middle Ages. Why was this done? What was the idea behind it?

John Ross

Well, at the heart of it was a man named Donald Jackson, who at the time was the scribe to the Queen of England. He was the scribe to the House of Lords and the Queen's Crown office. He was the premier calligraphy artist in the world. And it has been his life's dream and passion to handwrite the Bible, as unimaginable as that would be to most of the people in the world. It was his dream. And he had a long-standing relationship with leadership at St. John's Abbey, and the University in Collegeville, Minnesota.

So as the turn of the millennium came close, he asked them, what were they going to do to mark the occasion. And he suggested that they commissioned him to handwrite the Bible, something that had not been done in more than 500 years, essentially since the invention of the printing press. They thought about it. They prayed about it for a couple of years, which is pretty quick for Benedictines because they measure time in centuries. And after a couple of years of discernment they commissioned him in 1998.

It took him 15 years to create the original manuscript. It's about 11,150 pages of handwritten text from the New Revised Standard Version. Which is a theological statement in and of itself that the scholars behind the project made. It includes 160 original illuminations. An illumination is just a fancy word for a piece of art that has precious metal incorporated into the art, so gold, silver, or platinum in the art. This is what was done all throughout the Middle Ages. In a world lit only by fire, using that famous phrase, a page with gold on it would have been remarkable.

David Capes

Shimmering!

John Ross

Yes. We're used to seeing lights and screens and things that shine. But again, in a world lit only by fire, and among people who wouldn't have capacity to have gold, to see an illuminated page would have been remarkable. And it's no less remarkable today. It's a beautiful work of art.

David Capes

How many of these Bibles are there in the world?

John Ross

Well, that's a great question because lots of times people think I'm walking in the door with the Saint John's Bible. But I'm walking through the door with the fine art reproduction of it known as the Heritage Edition. The original manuscript in its entirety is in Collegeville, Minnesota. There's a beautiful exhibit there.

David Capes

St. John's University is one of the most beautiful campuses in the world!

John Ross

It is a beautiful place that people go for pilgrimages, retreats, and sabbaticals all the time. And most people pay a visit to the gallery of the Saint John's Bible. We have 28 pages on display at any given time from the original manuscript. Keeping in mind, the original manuscript is not yet bound. It's still on unbound, flat sheets of calfskin. Vellum. The words were written by seven scribes, using quills and ink and ancient techniques. And the rest of the pages are literally stored in a vault. There were seven artists, including Donald Jackson that did all of the 160 original illuminations and special treatments. Now, anytime you see the Saint John's Bible in a bound book form, you're looking at the Heritage Edition.

David Capes

So, if there's a binding and there's a seam going through, it's the Heritage Edition.

John Ross

If it's in book form, it's the Heritage Edition. Now, that might sound like I'm apologizing because it's a reproduction. But the Heritage Edition really has nothing to apologize for, as it's compared to the original manuscript. Because it was the same artist, Donald Jackson, who was the artistic director of the Heritage Edition. His goal, and it came at great expense, was to make sure that the Heritage Edition was as true to the original manuscript as was humanly possible. And so great time and expense went into that effort. They created 299 of the seven volume sets of the Heritage Edition.

David Capes

But there's another one called the Apostles Edition as well.

John Ross

The Heritage edition is rare. The Apostles' Edition is exceedingly rare, because there were only 12 of those created. And as of this coming fall, seven of those will have been placed around the world in places like the Washington National Cathedral, the Library of Congress, the Morgan Pierpont Museum

in New York City. Most recently in Lambeth Palace and Lambeth Palace library in London. Of course, the Vatican has got one.

David Capes

You met the Pope recently!

John Ross

I did. I had a chance to meet and greet him, personally. And the rumors of his ill health are greatly exaggerated because he was quite animated and very healthy and walking around on his own.

David Capes

Cool job to talk to the Pope over these things, and to talk with the Archbishop of Canterbury.

John Ross

That's right. We got a beautiful private reception with the archbishop Justin Welby last November as part of a big tour that we did across England, from Salisbury over to Canterbury and back to London. And he was delightful. And we had brought them one of those Apostles' Editions that was gifted in memory of the Queen, in fact. This project has really captured the imagination of both people of artistic integrity and passion. But also, obviously, because manifestly it's a Bible, it has captured the imagination of religious people. Both Christians and others within the Abrahamic tradition, all around the world.

David Capes

We're so used to seeing printed Bibles being rather cheap. I can just imagine people saying, well, that's a lot of trouble to go to, for just the word of God that we can just hand out easily. There's really a spiritual purpose that's driving this, isn't there?

John Ross

Yes. And it wasn't just a personal pet project of Donald Jackson being funded by a bunch of monks in Minnesota. I mean, that's not a realistic proposition. The driving force behind it was the mission, which is to ignite the spiritual imagination of people around the world of all faith journeys. If you break that mission statement down, you can see the Benedictine fingerprints all over it because they're wildly committed to hospitality. That's why they chose the NRSV instead of a Catholic translation of the Bible.

David Capes

That's really interesting; they didn't choose a Catholic translation.

John Ross

Yes! That was an early decision and they chose the NRSV as a way to make this accessible to the whole world. Next, they had to choose a language and they chose English for lots of obvious reasons. But it's not just that hospitality. It's also about the inclusive family of God.

I see your brand new book on the Book of Matthew sitting over here on a table in your office. And it reminds me that the first illumination in the Gospel and Acts volume is obviously the first page of

Matthew. We all know, Matthew 1 is the most riveting sequence of passages in all of Scripture! Forty-two generations of names, I think, across 17 verses. I mean, it's the most boring passage of scripture!

David Capes

Unless you read it correctly like I've done in my book!

John Ross

I know and I can't wait. I'm going to steal one of those when I'm walking out because I want to read it.

David Capes

You don't have to steal it. I'm going to give you one. That way you don't have to repent and write me later saying, "I'm sorry, I stole your book."

John Ross

Very good! They decided to take those dry words and create an illumination. They created a family tree in the shape of a menorah. There are some amazing names written in English, and Hebrew. All of them started with Abraham down at the base of the tree and went all the way up to the top where Jesus' name is. They went off text and included at the base next to Abraham's name, the name of Hagar. Sarah on one side, and Hagar on the other side, in English, Hebrew, and Arabic. It's the only name that has all three inscribed that way. Again, all of this is translatable into theological conviction, and priority.

David Capes

Well, in and of himself, Ishmael becomes a person with a great kingdom, a great, great tribe.

John Ross

That's right. If you're going to draw a picture of the family tree of God, you have to include everyone you can by name. And then they did a brilliant thing. It's very subtle. In the background of the branches of the tree, you can see the imprint in gold of the human DNA strand. And it was their way of saying, we are all in this picture. Every human that ever drew breath is a member of God's family.

David Capes

And it's in the covenant of Abraham, that Abraham's family is to be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

John Ross

Blessed to be a blessing, right?

David Capes

Yes! It's just full of theological images. I could see you just taking an image like that, and constructing a sermon around the scriptures that are interwoven with the art.

John Ross

You made mention of this, the church that I served in Waysata Minnesota was gifted a Heritage Edition in 2014. So, for my last eight years there, I had a Heritage Edition in my toolbox for ministry. And I

didn't even scratch the surface of what was possible as it relates to biblical interpretation and biblical conversation. You just throw up one of the 160 Illuminations on the screen in front of them. And that was just one that we talked about. There are 159 others. And you simply ask the question, what do you see. You've got an hour long Bible study. And before people know it they're doing biblical interpretation through the artwork that is placed in front of them.

David Capes

And that's what the Christian church has been doing since its founding. As you saw here, in the Stone Chapel, the stories are told on the ceiling through paintings. And Christians also used stained glass windows and other works of art. This has been our way of telling the story.

John Ross

And it was and still is, in many ways, a lost art form. Because with the printing press, who in their right mind would hand write the Bible anymore?

David Capes

Right? I can just call it up on my smartphone.

John Ross

Exactly. But there is something unique about this. Not only from the handwritten nature of it, and the illuminations that go with it, but the size and the scale of this thing. You've seen it with your own eyes. It's monumental in size. It's an exact reproduction of the original manuscript, because again, it was the same artists.

David Capes

It was done on traditional surfaces, right? It's done on vellum. It wasn't done on just paper. There was a desire to reproduce what scribes had been doing for hundreds of years. Because when they wrote their Bibles, they didn't write them on the cheapest materials. They wrote on the most expensive materials.

You've probably been to Europe and seen the chained Bibles. Books were so precious because of what they were made of, and what they contained, that they were chained to the table so people couldn't walk off with them.

If people want to see the Saint John's Bible for themselves, if they want to learn more about it, you have a great website. Tell us a little bit about that.

John Ross

Of the 299, Heritage Editions, 170 of them have been acquired by universities and churches, schools retreat centers etc. Primarily here in the United States, but literally around the world, far and wide as well. And seven of 12 Apostles' Edition have been acquired. All of these locations are listed on our website. There's, a tab that says "Locations", and you can go there and find the location nearest you. Our website is heritage.stjohnsbible.org. It's differentiated from the Saint John's Bible, original manuscript website, at least for now. We're going to combine them next year, but I won't bore you with

that. But to see where the Heritage Editions are; it's heritage.stjohnsbible.org, and then just click on the "Locations" tab.

David Capes

When I see these things, it inspires my imagination. It gets my juices flowing a little bit. Because of the beauty of it, first of all, just to see something so beautiful. And then to know the impetus behind it. This is exciting. John, thanks for being with us today on *The Stone Chapel Podcast*. I hope people will go out and take a look at it. And if you have a little bit of extra cash, you could go get one yourself. Or, your institutions might be able to, your church or your retreat center, or your museum.

John Ross

Yes, we've got about 130 left. We don't know if that'll even last five more years, but we'll see. And when they're gone, they're gone. It cannot be redone.

David Capes

John, thanks for being with us. Look forward to seeing you again here in Houston at our library and maybe over in Yarnton.

John Ross

I'll be both places in the next six months so count on it David. Thank you.