

Illuminated Scripture: Jesus in Full Color

The practice of Ignatian Contemplation is one way to make the text of the Bible shine with new insights. There are other ways of illuminating the text: let us try literally illuminating a picture of Jesus. This page is only a picture, not text, but by decorating it with precious pigments (perhaps not quite as expensive as they were for the original illuminator of the Book of Kells), giving it life and color, maybe even decorating it with gold or silver ink...just as we bring a black and white text into full color through a practice of imagining through Ignatian Contemplation, we can bring forth those colors literally on the page. We can express the beauty of the text through visual illumination and illustration.

In Western Christianity in the Medieval Period, illuminated manuscripts were a way of communicating the beauty of the stories of the Bible, especially to people who were not literate in Latin. Church walls were covered with paintings as well (later, stained glass served a similar storytelling function, with the benefit of literal illumination). In Eastern Christianity, images, or rather, *icons*, serve not a primarily educational purpose, but a devotional one. Encountering the holy, the divine, in an image, is as profound and complex an experience as encountering the holy in a scripture passage. The carefully, prayerfully crafted icons communicate so much that they are “written” rather than merely painted. Throughout Church history, images, especially of Jesus, have been controversial. Icons and paintings and stained glass windows have been lovingly crafted and also zealously destroyed over and over, for fear of idolatry. John of Damascus, a 7th century monk, defended the making images as a fitting way to venerate the God who became incarnate. God became able to be imaged, and so to ban images is almost as bad as denying the reality of the Incarnation (or so John of Damascus says).

As you encounter holy images, especially images of Jesus, consider how you can experience the divine through that image. What does it communicate to you about the life of Jesus? About the character of Jesus? What does it mean to worship a God who became incarnate in the man Jesus, whose image is able to be drawn on a piece of paper?