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Who do you imagine is the best-selling artist of all times? ...

“According to the publisher HarperCollins, the world's bestseller is a Swiss religious artist by the name of Annie Vallotton. Even if the name is unfamiliar, chances are you may have seen her work or own an unopened copy of one of her books.”¹

You may recognize her work from the Good News Bible translation that came out in the 1970s.

I remember how much I enjoyed seeing her pictures in the Bible I had as a child, for they added a visual interpretation to the story. I think I must have tried to create my own illustrated Bible once when I was a child, for I still have a small Bible where I tried to add my own pictures by placing stickers throughout the pages.

Publishers have been adding decoration to Bibles for a very long time, which began with a process called “illumination.” An illuminated manuscript contained decorated letters, borders, or

miniature illustrations, a process dating back to the 5th century.

For example, here’s a page from a Latin Bible dated around 1407... Here’s a close-up of the decorative letter P, the first letter in the word *Petrus*, meaning “Peter.”

Here’s a page written in Syriac illustrating the story of Job.

Even today publishers are striving to find ways to illuminate the Bible with illustrations, as in the newly published St. John’s Bible, started in 1998 and completed a year ago on May 9. In the midst of all the mass produced Bibles, this Bible is unique in that it is the first hand-made Bible to be done in 500 years.

The Bible...bound in seven volumes, contains 1,150 pages, weighs 165 pounds and measures two-feet tall by three-feet wide when opened. And every single one of its nearly 775,000 words was painstakingly written by hand by a team of scribes using 130-year-old Chinese ink

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dispensed through writing quills made of goose, turkey and swan feathers.²

Look at this illustration of Jesus' baptism.

The *Good News Bible* has even gone beyond those cute line drawings in the 1970s to contemporary photography illustrations throughout the 2009 edition called *The Book*.³

Isn't it amazing that artists and publishers would take such effort for thousands of years to create such beautifully illustrated versions of the Bible? I think it's because these illuminated versions help illuminate our understanding of the ancient words, bringing to light a deeper understanding through our visual senses what God has been showing us.

In a way, those who have been creating illuminated Bibles are striving to do what Philip did as he walked along the road and met an Ethiopian who served in the royal court of the queen of Ethiopia. Philip had felt inspired by the Spirit to approach the chariot the Ethiopian was riding, and Philip heard him reading from the prophet Isaiah.

Philip inquired, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

The Ethiopian replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

Have you ever felt that way when reading the Bible, as though it doesn't make much sense unless someone is guiding you? Considering that some parts were written 3000 years ago, it's not surprising that some ideas seem a bit confusing to us. Many customs and practices seem ancient and hard to understand, such as animal sacrifice and laws about dietary and food regulations. Their notion of the world was much different than ours, not having the theories of evolution or telescopes to gaze into the vastness of the universe.

God illuminated their lives through scriptures within their current understanding of the world, but as our understanding grows, so does our interpretation of those ancient words.

When reading the Bible, it may feel challenging to even decide where to begin, for the Bible is contains 66 books divided into two sections (what

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we call the Old and New Testaments) with a 400-year gap of time between these two portions. The books are not all in chronological order, and the type of literature varies from poetry to narratives to philosophical arguments to letters written for churches to lists of genealogies. No wonder it's confusing and hard to get started! And even if we begin to understand the historical context in which a portion was written, we still have to figure out how it applies to us today!

A few tips for those who are wanting to read the Bible:

- Begin with a small portion rather than trying to cover a large book on one setting.
- We are fortunate to have so many new translations available, so find one that makes sense to you, such as the *Common English Bible* used on the screen in worship. You can even preview many of them online before making a decision. Using a study Bible with notes written on each page and introductions to each book helps provide background on what you are reading.

- Take time to think and reflect on a portion that grabs your attention, for God may still touch your heart through these ancient words.
- Read the Bible with others and have conversations, such as in a Sunday morning or Wednesday evening group or with members of your family.

These steps can help illuminate the ancient words for our lives today, but the process goes well beyond the words on the page, for each of you helps to illuminate the stories as well.

Jumping back to the story in the Book of Acts, after Philip and the Ethiopian talked about the passage he was reading, what happened next? Philip invited the man to take another step, to become part of the larger community of faith through baptism.

Philip was so exciting about what he believed that he wanted this confused traveler to be part of what he had experienced. You might be thinking, "But that sounds too easy. How do we get people

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that interested in what we're doing here at Crossroads?"

I recently read in a church newsletter an article from a friend of mine who wrote about a workshop he attended on helping the church to grow. The speaker talked about the research that indicated the characteristics of every growing church. My friend has been involved with lots of church growth plans through the years and he knew there was no plan that fit every church. But then speaker said

that their research found that there is only one essential characteristic. At this point he had my full attention. And he asked me: would you like to know what it was? I did!

The one characteristic: the laity are excited about what is happening in their church.

This is about who makes the difference (the laity—not the pastor), their emotional state

(excited), being in action (what is *happening*—discussion or dreams are not enough), and about ownership and empowerment (*their* church).⁴

It's about taking all those ideas we caught a few weeks ago, discerning which ones we are passionate about, working together to make them happen, and being excited about what God is doing here in our midst. In doing so, we become like the illuminated scriptures—you and I become the pictures that illustrate today what God is doing here among us.

So this week as you read a portion from the Bible, discern how God has made a difference in your life, and then illuminate someone's life by inviting him or her to join you here in this place to experience God's presence!

³ <http://illuminatedworld.com/>

⁴ David Kueker, Caseyville United Methodist Church newsletter, Spring 2012.

¹ Stephen Tomkins, "The best-selling artist of all time," March 11, 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/3501430.stm

² Michael Inbar, "Man unveils 1,150-page Bible — written by hand," 10/19/11, <http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/44959182/ns/today-books/t/man-unveils--page-bible-written-hand/#.T6QXbOveCE4>