

# Symbolism in the Sanctuary of First Presbyterian Church

## “Sacred Furniture”

There are three central pieces of “sacred furniture” in the Chancel of First Presbyterian Church.



The Lord's Table



The Font



The Pulpit

Again, you will remember the connection between “word” and “sacrament.” Here is a visual display of that connectedness.

We do not call The Lord's Table an “altar.” This is reflective of our understanding that Christ is not being sacrificed again and again. At a table, we are welcomed as guests, offered food and drink, are joined with others in a circle of fellowship, and are nourished for life. At The Lord's Table all of this is true and we are united with those who are in the Church Triumphant, to whom we are joined by the grace of God.

The Font has eight (8) sides. This is because the Sacrament of Baptism is often referred to as “the eighth day of creation.” While the Genesis legend tells us that God created the world and everything in it in seven days, at the baptismal font we become part of God's new creation - the eighth day of creation. It is, therefore, octagonal in shape.

The Pulpit is the place from which the Word of God is proclaimed. In earlier times, the pulpit was elevated so that the preacher's voice would be better carried into the worship space. In some cathedrals, the pulpit has a covering, called “the sounding board,” which helped project the speaker's voice and from which we have taken a term for a person or group whose reactions to suggested ideas are used as a test of their validity or likely success before they are made public.

On our pulpit are five carvings which you may not have noticed.



These carvings represent the four gospels.

The Gospel of Matthew is represented by a winged man because Matthew's gospel offers us more on the humanity of Jesus than any other gospel.

The Gospel of Mark is represented by the winged lion which symbolizes royalty and stands for the Kingship of Christ.

The Gospel of Luke is represented by the winged ox. The ox was a sacrificial animal in ancient Israel and Luke's gospel is focused on the sacrifice of Christ for the sins of the world.

The Gospel of John is represented by the eagle. The eagle is said to soar higher than any other bird. John's gospel style soars, beginning with, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Also on the pulpit, as well as in other places, we see this symbol:



It appears to be "IHS." But this is a misreading. There are two viable interpretations. If we are reading in Greek, those three letters would be the first three letters of the name Jesus in that language. If we are reading in Latin, the letters are an abbreviation for Jesus of Nazareth, Savior. The "I" is "J" in Latin, the "H" is actually an "N" for Nazareth, and the "S" is the beginning of the word "Savior."

## Accessories for Worship



On the Table are two candles. The image of light has been central to Christianity and represents a “carry-over” from Judaism. The two candles on the Table remind us that Jesus was both human and divine.



The candelabra hold two important reminders. First, we are reminded of the “menorah” in the Tabernacle and Temple. The seven branched candles were “sacred furniture” for the ancient Israelites and they can still be seen in some synagogues. Secondly, the seven candles remind us of the tongue of flame that descended on the disciples at Pentecost.

Seven is, of course, an important number in our faith tradition. In Isaiah 11, we are reminded of seven gifts: wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and the fear of the Lord, to which if added, godliness. In the Book of Revelation, the writer says that the Lamb of God is worthy to receive: power, riches, wisdom, strength, honor, glory, and blessing. (Revelation 5:12)

Of course, the other reminder offered to us is the “Light of the World” that shatters every form of darkness.

## “Threes and Fours”

Throughout the Sanctuary, there are symbols that picture the number three (3). This, of course, is a reference to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity - “God in Three Persons.” The classic symbol for the Trinity is a triangle: three sides.

In our Sanctuary, the triangle takes on various forms:



All of these are stylized triangles. All of them point us “upward.” All of them remind us of the doctrine of the Trinity.

There are also a few “fours” around the sanctuary.



“Fours” are “quatrefoil” and remind us of the Gospels. Sometimes the winged creatures are depicted in the center of quatrefoils.

## An Extra Surprise

But there is also a hidden surprise that requires a very discerning eye.



This pattern is repeated all around the Chancel. But, if we break the pattern, here's what we see:



The most ancient symbol for the Christian faith was a fish. In the Greek, the letters:



form the word "fish." But as an acrostic, the letters mean:

Jesus	I
Christ	CH
God's	TH
Son	U
Savior	S

The fish would be drawn in the dirt as a symbol for identifying Christians to each other. We find it etched on burial vaults and the in catacombs. We find the fish motif in ancient mosaics.

So, not you know a little more about some of the symbols in our Sanctuary. Wouldn't Dan Brown be proud?