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Symbols of the Reredos

RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM OF THE REREDOS

A **reredos** is a screen or decoration behind the altar in a church, depicting religious symbols or icons, woven in a tapestry, or carved in stone or wood. At a time in history when the general populace had limited education, and limited literacy, these symbols – like the statues and stained glass windows found in the great cathedrals – told the story of faith, sacrifice and redemption.

How strange now that at a time of high literacy, we must use words to explain the symbols, for not all of the symbols in First Presbyterian's reredos are readily recognizable. Yes, most of us can guess the significance of the six-pointed Star of David, or the two tablets of stone. And most of us have been exposed to the icons representing the four Evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John).

First Presbyterian's reredos contains other, less understood icons representing the Apostles and the barbaric tools of their martyrdom. Let's take a look, starting at bottom left.



The Hand of God with Crown – one of the earliest symbols of the Creator.

In the Old Testament, Job and Ecclesiastes refer to the “hand of God”.



Serpent and Tree – tells the story of the temptation and fall of Adam and Eve.

“And the LORD God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.’” (Genesis 2:16-17)



Crown of Thorns and Nails – again, a straightforward reference to Christ's passion and crucifixion.

“And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him”. (Mark 15:17)



Sword, Club and Rope – symbols of the arrest of Jesus and Judas's betrayal and suicide.

Intriguing that his treason would be memorialized at First Presbyterian.

His suicide bespoke genuine remorse. Did forgiveness follow?



Chalice – representing the Last Supper and Christ's new covenant of his blood, shed for many unto the forgiveness of sins. (Matthew 26:28)



Pelican - an intriguing symbol of piety and redemption.

Legend has it that a pelican would wound itself, to feed its young with its own blood. We have not been able to verify this phenomenon due to Albany's northern clime.



Christ Seated in the Place of Power – holding His cross in defiance of death, and triumph over the secular authorities who tortured and executed him.

First Presbyterian's reredos and companion window (Alpha et Omega) both given by Mr. and Mrs. Frederick McDonald, were dedicated at First Presbyterian's 175th Anniversary Celebration on Nov. 20, 1938.



Ascending Dove - symbol associated with the Holy Spirit, also linked with Jesus's baptism and Pentecost. It also recalls Noah's dove, harbinger of hope. The carver took artistic license here – *descending* doves were the convention of the day.



Pomegranate – promise of the resurrection. An ancient symbol of hope and prosperity, praised in the Old Testament of the Bible and in the Babylonian Talmud. In ancient Egypt, pomegranates were a symbol of safe passage into the next life and were found placed near treasures of King Tutankhamen.



Seamless Robe and Dice – Christ's executioners rolled dice to determine who would get his cloak, for it was of high quality, and they were loath to cut it into pieces. *“Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it.”* (John 19:24)



Ladder, Sponge and Spear – *“None of his bones shall be broken.”* (John 19:36) Symbols of Christ's crucifixion including the sponge, soaked in sour wine, offered to slake His thirst. *“At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink.”* (Matthew 27:48)



Passionflower – first cultivated by Native Americans, Spanish missionaries named this plant with reference to elements of the *passion* of Christ: Its coronal threads were seen as a symbol for the crown of thorns, the curling tendrils for the cords of the whips, the five stamens for the wounds, the three stigmas for the nails on the cross.



The Ten Commandments – given to Moses at Mount Sinai. One tablet concerns our relationship to God.

The other concerns our relationship with one another. (Exodus 34:1)



Serpent and Cross – prophecy of the crucifixion. The symbol of the serpent has multiple meanings. Moses' staff turned into a serpent and vanquished the conjured snake of the Pharaoh's magician. (Exodus 7:9-15)



Lamb of God - *“Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi”* – symbol of Jesus, who sacrificed so that we might be released from the snares of sin. (John 1:29)



Six-Pointed Star of David – Jesus was born of the House of David, in fulfillment of the prophecy of the Messiah. (Zechariah 12:1-14 and Luke 1:27)



Scallop Shell with Three Drops of Water – a *symbol of baptism* – *“in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”*

This symbol is also associated with the Apostle James the Greater – whose missionary activity took him as far as Spain.



Crossed Keys – the “keys to the kingdom” were entrusted to St. Peter, who became the first Bishop of Rome. The Vatican flag continues this symbolism today. “...whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 16:19) This carving also includes the X-shaped cross of Peter’s brother Andrew. Both were crucified.



Pilgrim Staff, Water Bottle, Serpent and Chalice – a lot is going on in this carving. The staff and water bottle represent James the Greater, who went forth to convert all nations. The Serpent and Chalice represent a test of faith for John (James’s brother – who was given poison to drink, but survived. John was the only apostle to die of natural causes.



Tau Cross, Rope and Carpenter’s Square - the T-shaped cross, associated with Philip’s martyrdom, foreshadowed the Cross of Christ. (Ezekiel 9:4). The carpenter’s (or architect’s) square is associated with the Apostle Thomas, symbolizing the “building up of wealth” in Heaven. A thick rope placed around his neck, St. Mark was dragged to his death by an angry mob



Flaying Knife and Fuller’s Bat - gruesome symbols of barbaric martyrdom. The fuller’s club was intended to thicken fabric. It became the instrument of martyrdom for James the Less (first bishop of Jerusalem). The flaying knife was used to skin the Apostle Bartholomew (also called Nathaniel), who was then crucified for good measure.



Knotted Club and Hatchet – again, more tools of martyrdom. The knotted club was used to dispatch Jude (brother of James the Lesser). The hatchet represents Matthew’s martyrdom.



Saw and Battle Axe - St. Simon was sawn in two. A battle axe was part of Matthias’s demise. It wasn’t easy being a Christian back then. Of course we live in subtler times, with higher-tech weaponry.

Now let’s take a look at the right side of the reredos, starting at the bottom with the **Four Evangelists**. The symbols derive from the opening of the Book of Ezekiel, where the prophet envisioned four living creatures in the middle of a glowing fire from a stormy north wind. The faces of the creatures resembled a human being, a lion, an ox and an eagle.



St John – The Eagle – his symbol because of all four gospels, his uniquely captured the divinity of Christ. John’s literary skills also soared above the commentary of his fellow evangelists.



St. Matthew – Winged Man - Matthew’s Gospel deals with the genealogy of Christ; the winged man refers to human ancestors. All four evangelists are depicted with wings. “Each had four faces, and each of them had four wings.” (Ezekiel 1:4)



St. Mark – Winged Lion – think of St. Mark’s Square in Venice, with the winged lion high atop a column. Mark deals with the resurrection of Christ; it was thought that a lioness’ cubs were born dead and they were given life from the father lion’s breath.



St. Luke – Winged Ox – Luke is also represented as a physician. Luke’s Gospel deals with the sacrifice of Christ; oxen were common sacrificial animals. Could the ox represent Luke’s stubborn streak?