

**SYMBOLS OF THE SANCTUARY**  
**THE STORY OF SALVATION**  
**Week 1 of St. Pauls Summer Sermon Series**

July 5, 2009

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Genesis 3: 17-19

*And to [Adam] [God] said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."*

Luke 1:26-33

*In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."*

John 1: 1-5

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

Philippians 2: 12-13

*Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for [God's] good pleasure.*

### **Sermon**

This is the beginning of our summer sermon series on symbols of the sanctuary celebrating it's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Today we begin a journey that will last for 10 weeks. Each week throughout the summer we'll be calling attention to the symbols in this building that reinforce what we come to hear in the words of scripture and in hymns and songs.

We'll be focusing in on the symbols that we may seldom notice, but which surround us with stories and sermons of our faith in glass and stone, wood and plaster.

The symbols begin speaking even before we enter the building with the exterior architecture of our sanctuary. Some of the elements bring in sacred themes that come from pre-Christian times, themes that speak of humankind's perennial desire to house the Divine in sacred spaces.

Our sanctuary – which was designed by architect Benjamin Franklin Olson – was dedicated in 1959. This building where we're seated today replaced the sanctuary that stood on this spot before it burned down on Christmas eve, 1955. The people of St. Pauls who decided to rebuild in Lincoln Park wanted to ensure the building conveyed the connections they felt to the past, present and future. They also wanted those who looked at our building to know what kind of congregation worships here.

So they included elements of classical church architecture: the arches around the windows and the dentils along the eaves. These elements are found in early Greek and Roman temple architecture as well as everywhere in European cathedrals. They also used long-lasting materials – brick and limestone and marble, intending for this building to endure.

The new church building included a steeple, as had the old one, only this time there were no bells. One of our old timers told Edward Puschman that that decision was made in deference to Children's Hospital, to provide a quiet zone. (That was before the heli-pad was installed!)

The idea of a steeple or spire comes from ancient Egyptian obelisks that reached upward to the sun in worship of the Sun God. Our steeple, which is made of shining, stainless steel, also draws our eyes toward heaven. But our steeple is topped with an empty cross, a symbol that says "He is not here. He is risen, and has gone to be with God." It's a "budded" or blooming cross like the one above the altar, to show that new life has arisen from death.

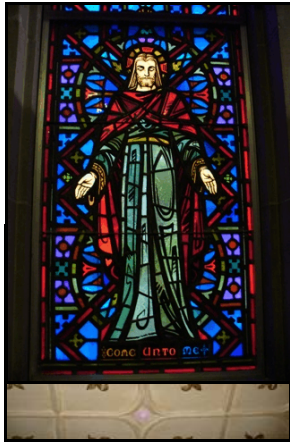
Over the doorway on the north entrance, the name of our church is carved in stone. St. Pauls Church. No denominational affiliation. And no apostrophe. There is no apostrophe in the German language so this is not a mistake. It's a little reminder of the heritage of this congregation whose original constitution said: "The language of St. Pauls shall be German for all time."

We enter the sanctuary to worship and are greeted inside with a treasure trove of symbols, many of which are common to all Christians. But here in our building they have a decidedly Protestant nuance. It is on the symbols found in the Narthex that we'll dwell this morning.

When we rush in on Sunday mornings our ultimate goal is often the sanctuary. We grab our bulletin -- our map to guide us through the worship experience – but how often do we stop to notice the symbols in our Narthex? I for one spend a lot of time there in preparation for the processional, but haven't noticed or hear them speaking, until I was preparing for this sermon.

Then this week I became aware of the way the Narthex is designed to prepare us for what and whom we will encounter in the sanctuary. The symbols there actually help us make a transition

from our hectic lives outside to our time of worship inside.



In a very formal and stylized way, the vaulted ceiling depicts a garden. By far the most prominent plant, the one that dominates the garden design, is the thistle. The thistle -- that symbol of our expulsion from Eden. The thistle is a symbol of toil and frustration, loneliness and longing. It recalls the story of the fall of Adam and Eve and the curse of being cut off from the ideal state of union with the Divine.

If you've tried to free your lawn or garden of thistles you know how difficult they are to uproot. And if you've ever gone bare-legged through a field with nettles you know how long their sting can linger!

But on our ceiling -- in plaster -- the thistle is boxed in and surrounded on four sides with *fleur de lis*, another stylized plant. *Fleur de lis* represent the lily. And the lily is pregnant with symbolism. It is a representation of purity, and so is a common reference to Mary, the mother of Jesus, to whom God made the surprise announcement -- that she would conceive a child and bear a king of the lineage of David.

So the *fleur de lis* also symbolizes royalty. That's probably why this symbol which was adopted by the kings of France. And, because it has three petals, the *fleur de lis* is also a symbol of the Trinity -- God in three persons. You'll notice that in our Narthex the *fleur de lis* is painted gold. If it were white we might assume it was a reference to the Virgin Mary. But since we're Protestant -- and it is painted gold -- it's more likely a sign of the purity and royalty of Jesus and the sovereignty of God the Creator.

You'll also notice, scattered about the garden -- connecting everything -- there are roses. Pink roses. The rose has been a common Christian symbol since the 1200s. It represents the promise of a messiah, and for us that promise has been fulfilled in the flesh-and-blood Jesus. When a rose appears as white it is again a symbol of purity and might be a reference to Mary. When it's pink or red it refers to martyrdom, specifically Jesus' death on the cross.



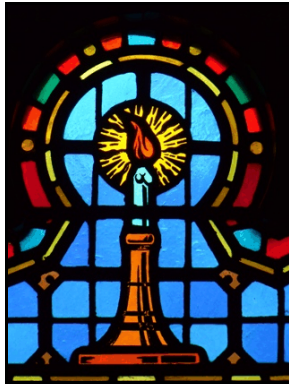
So the symbols in the ceiling tell a story of a savior who isn't a far-off savior in heaven, but one who comes to live with us, in the midst of the thistles and thorns. A savior who is willing to lay down his life so that we might find union once again with the Divine in the midst of the pain and toil of daily living. So that we might have balm for the stings of the thistles and thorns we encounter.

The Narthex, then, begins the story of Salvation. And that story is made very specific in the three stained glass windows in the west wall of the Narthex, immediately in front of the doors to the sanctuary. They show us the specific ways in which God has come to us, to share our common lot -- through Jesus.

There are three images of Jesus in the Narthex, that both invite and promise. In the center

window Jesus invites us, “Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. And if you cannot find the way because of the darkness, I will be light for your path, for I am the light of the world. And if you get lost on the way, I will seek you and find you, for I am the Good Shepherd.

These images – of the beckoning – come directly from gospel dating back to ancient Hebrew light and shepherd show him as those of us who live in this Divine garden. They show us answer to an ancient prayer for a longing for a closer relationship loves no matter who we are or



savior, of the light and the shepherd stories that echo with allusions scriptures. The images of Jesus as the answer to prayers arising from prickly, difficult world, outside the the many ways in which Jesus is the Savior. Jesus addressed the human with a merciful God, a God who where we are on life’s journey.

As the fulfillment of that teachings, Jesus becomes a as geographic, ethnic and speaks to us today. This savior beckons from the windows in the Narthex for us to come near to find sanctuary. In the Narthex, we meet and greet one another, and to meet and greet God-with-us. The Narthex is a space where we meet our deep need and longing, before moving into the sanctuary.

longing, through his own life and savior, who transcends time, as well cultural boundaries. This Jesus still

Those who designed and built our church building 50 years ago did so embodying in wood and stone, in plaster and glass stories of our faith that define both who we are and who we hope to be. In the Narthex we’re also reminded, by the brass plaques, of all the people of the past who contributed to build this lovely building.

Today we’ll have an opportunity to express our gratitude in our offering and through communion with those who gave us a building that would still be standing – telling its stories – 50 years later.

As we take communion today, I invite you to observe the symbols in the Narthex. As you leave worship, also notice the stained glass windows above the doors. They remind us that we’ve got a particular story to tell, a story of an encounter with the Divine as reflected in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. And they remind us as well – by the candles that flank the cross – that each of us has the light of Christ within us. We take that into the world when we leave.

Hide it under a bushel? No! Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!

Amen.