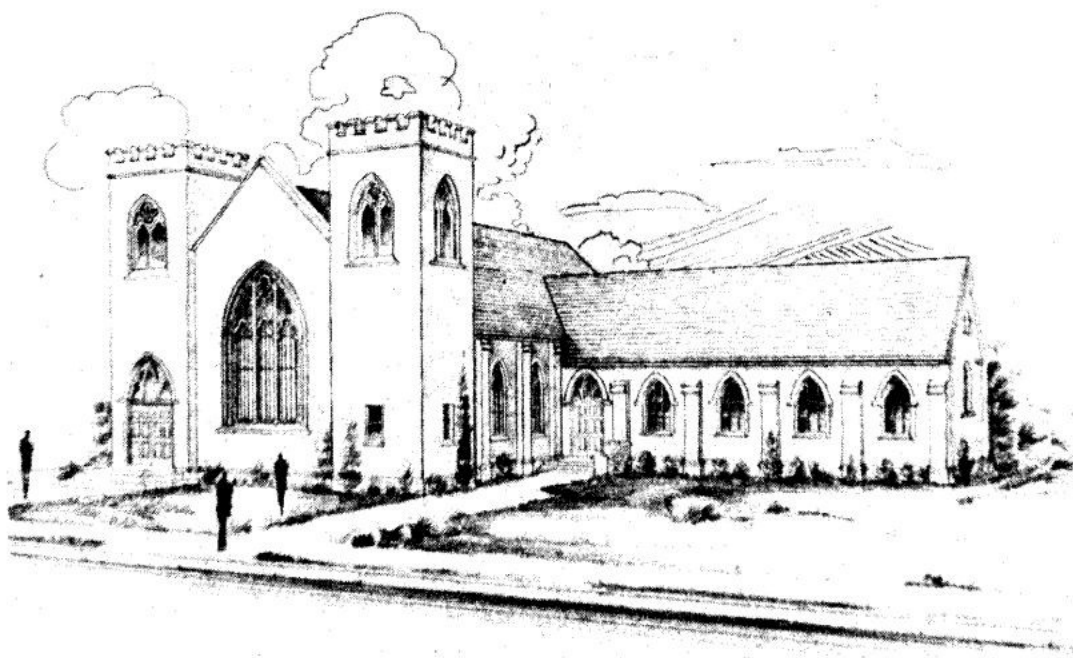


# A Visual Guide to the Symbols of our Sanctuary



First Presbyterian Church

Marfa, Texas



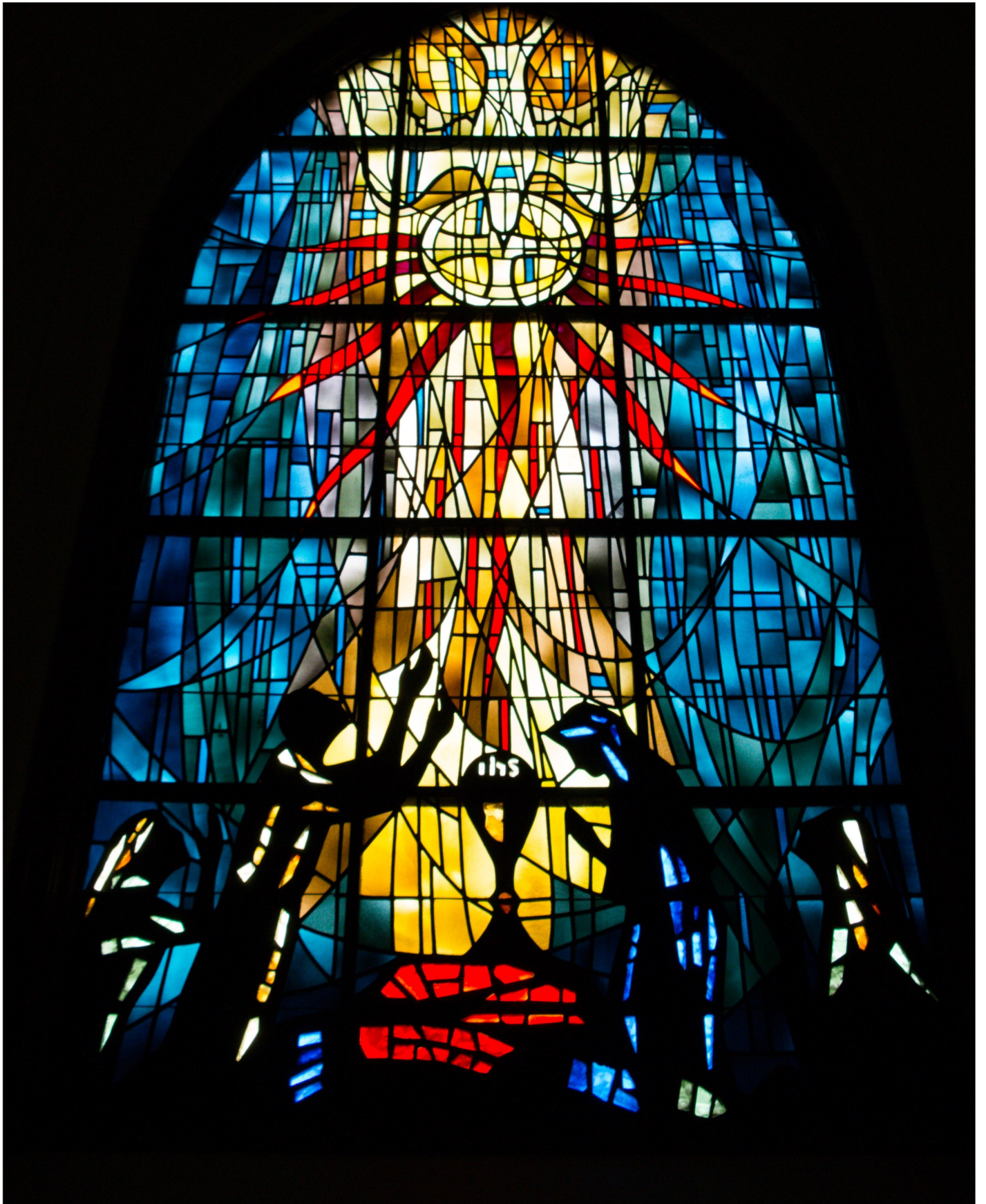
When the men and women of the First Presbyterian Church of Marfa, Texas decided to construct a new building in 1951, they did not have to make it beautiful. In a pamphlet drawn up by the building committee they make plain the need they had for a more adequate space in which to hold Worship and Christian education, but a new building really only had to meet those immediate needs to fulfill its purpose. Instead, they felt strongly that, “the Church shall meet for worship in a house as beautiful as any of our individual houses, a place able to say to us and to our town, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts’.”

It is to our great benefit that they did. These men and women wanted to erect an edifice that was not only beautiful, but capable of communicating to them and their neighbors something of the essence of the faith they lived. It is the modest hope of this little booklet to join them in that mission by providing commentary on the visible Gospel they deposited within these walls.





# Windows



The memorial window in the narthex of the church is entitled “The Holy Catholic Church” in the common parlance of the Apostles Creed. A memorandum from the church session remarks that the theme of the window is “the gathering together of all [people] about the common table of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in prayerful worship and adoration; and in turn receiving love, grace, mercy, forgiveness, and peace in the Holy Spirit from God our Father and from His Son Jesus Christ.”

Members of the congregation are gathered around a cup, a symbol of the Eucharistic meal, marked with “IHS”, Latin initials for Jesus, the Savior of Humankind. They look expectantly upward. There the image of a dove, the ancient symbol of the Holy Spirit, descends in power upon the people. The red streaks of flame are meant to evoke the story of the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in Acts 2:1-4.



### Christ: Lord of Human History

A golden cross stands in the middle of two Greek letters: Alpha and Omega. The cross is used in each window as a symbol of Christ, and the gold color in this window is meant to emphasize Christ's divinity. The two Greek letters in red are a reference to Christ's pronouncement in Revelation 22:13, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." Red is used to denote both love and suffering.



### Christ: Lord of the Church

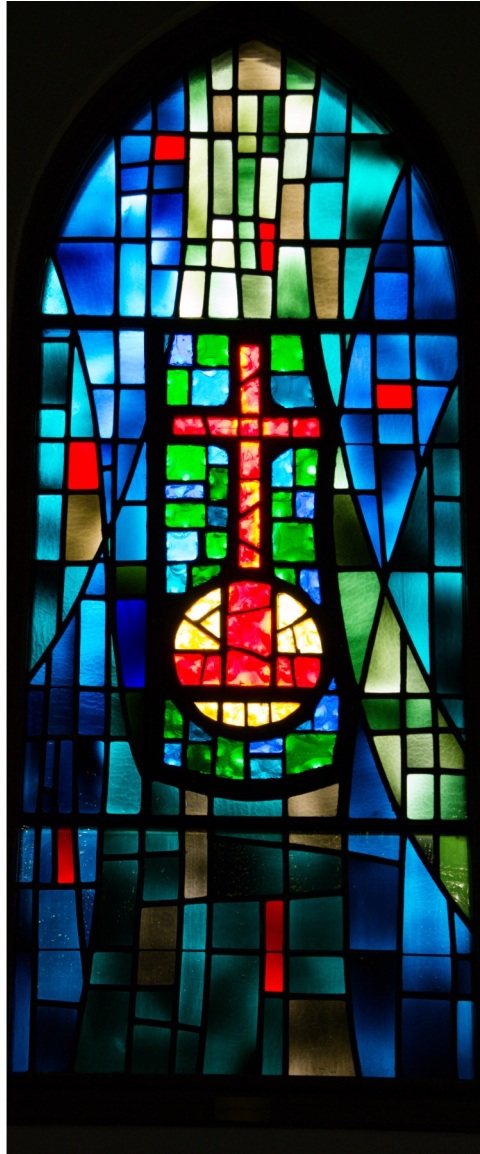
Christians have long seen in the story of the ark in Genesis 6:5-8:22 a metaphor for God's faithful preservation of a Church often beset by difficulty. Ambrose of Milan, writing in the 4th century, drew parallels between the Church as the hull of a ship, and the Cross of Christ as a mast.





### Christ: Lord of Eternity

The golden ring at the top of the window is a composite symbol. Gold is typically associated with divinity, and a ring is an image of completion and eternity. Intersecting this ring is a violet cross. Violet also holds a range of symbolic meaning, and is here meant as a symbol of Christ's love, truth, passion, and suffering. Christ intersects with and completes eternity.



### Christ: Lord of the Nations

The *orbis terrarum* beneath the cross is divided into three parts representing the three known continents of the ancient world and their peoples. The cross springs from the intersection of the vertical and horizontal lines where Jerusalem was typically depicted. Red connotes both suffering and power.



### Christ: Lord of All

The *globus cruciger* is a traditional symbol of Christ's dominion over all the earth. Here the globe is offset, and the cross displayed behind it remains centered, signifying that Christ is Lord not only of the earth, but the cosmos. "...For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.

(Colossians 1:15)



### The Trinity

In keeping with Hebrew and Christian tradition, God the Father is depicted only as a hand, here raised in a gesture of blessing. Consistent with the theme of Lordship in the other five windows, Christ the Son is represented by the cross. The Holy Spirit is depicted as a dove as it is described in all four Gospel accounts of Christ's baptism.



# Pulpit and Lectern





*Clockwise from top, left:* 1) **Oak**; 2) **Rose**; 3) **Pomegranate**; 4) **Olive**. Each of these plants holds its own symbolism within the Christian tradition. **An oak (1)** is a symbol of Christian faith and endurance. The mature tree growing from a seed is also sometimes used as a metaphor for resurrection. **A rose (2)** may signify either purity or suffering and is often used as a reminder that for the Christian the two are often the same. **The pomegranate (3)** is an ancient symbol of resurrection, and also symbolizes the unity of the church as the many seeds compose one fruit. **The olive (4)** is a symbol of peace in the biblical tradition, but also serves as symbol of plenty due to its use in the production of oil.





The book inset within a six-pointed star with the alpha and omega inscribed upon its pages is a symbol of the Word of God. In preaching, the Word of God is proclaimed. The star is a symbol of God's numerous gathered people, and it is the Word of God which binds them together in worship.



Scholars believe that the earliest confession of the Christian faith was likely “*χριστος κυριος*,” “Christ is Lord”. Here we see two contradictory symbols intertwined with one another: a crown, the symbol of victory and royalty; and a cross, the instrument of execution upon which Christ died. As the liturgy is led from the lectern, the congregation remembers that Christ is Lord and confesses together this surprising truth.



# Baptismal Font





*Clockwise from top, left* **1) The fleur-de-lis**, a stylized lily, symbolizes both purity and royalty and invokes the words of 1 Peter 2:9 in which the baptized are called “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.” **2) A hyssop blossom** symbolizes both penitence and humility, as well as recalling the words of Psalm 51:7, “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” **3) An oak leaf** in a baptismal context alludes to Psalm 1, which describes those who keep God’s laws as being “like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season...”

# Pews





*Clockwise from top, (1) The stylized Celtic cross, (2) the cruciform rose, and (3) the open book remind those sitting in the pews of the call to live lives marked by faith in Christ, purity of heart and mind, and guided by the Word of God in Holy Scripture.*





“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.”

(John 10:11–15 NRSV)



It is common in the Christian tradition to use design elements which utilize numerical symbolism. Churches are often embellished with patterns of three and four. Three typically connotes the Trinity. Four typically connotes the four gospels. Multiples of these two numbers are also quite common, and especially their multiplication by each other yielding a product of twelve. Twelve symbolizes both the twelve tribes of ancient Israel and the twelve Disciples.

Crosses and cruciform symbols are also used in Christian churches. As you look around our sanctuary, take note of these smaller symbols which are often overlooked. Some of them will be above your head, and some you will not notice unless you do some counting.

## **Acknowledgements**

All scripture quotations in this little book are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

This book would not have been possible without the good work of the late George Ferguson. His *Signs & Symbols in Christian Art* was a great help in both the recognition and explanation of the symbols in our sanctuary.

Finally, this book owes much to the faithful people of the First Presbyterian Church of Marfa, Texas, who took the time to design and build such a beautiful space, continually steward its upkeep, and regularly use it in accordance with its design to be a space suited for prayer, praise, and the continual ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Since 1951 this congregation has been blessed to use this beautiful building for the worship of God. It is our humble hope that this little book will help you add meaning to the rich visual symbols built into our sanctuary.

*Ad maiorem Dei gloriam*

The People of the First Presbyterian Church  
Marfa, Texas