

**The Language of Symbols at
Pebble Hill
Presbyterian Church**

Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church
5299 Jamesville Road, DeWitt, New York

THE LANGUAGE OF SYMBOLS

In

Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church's Building

at

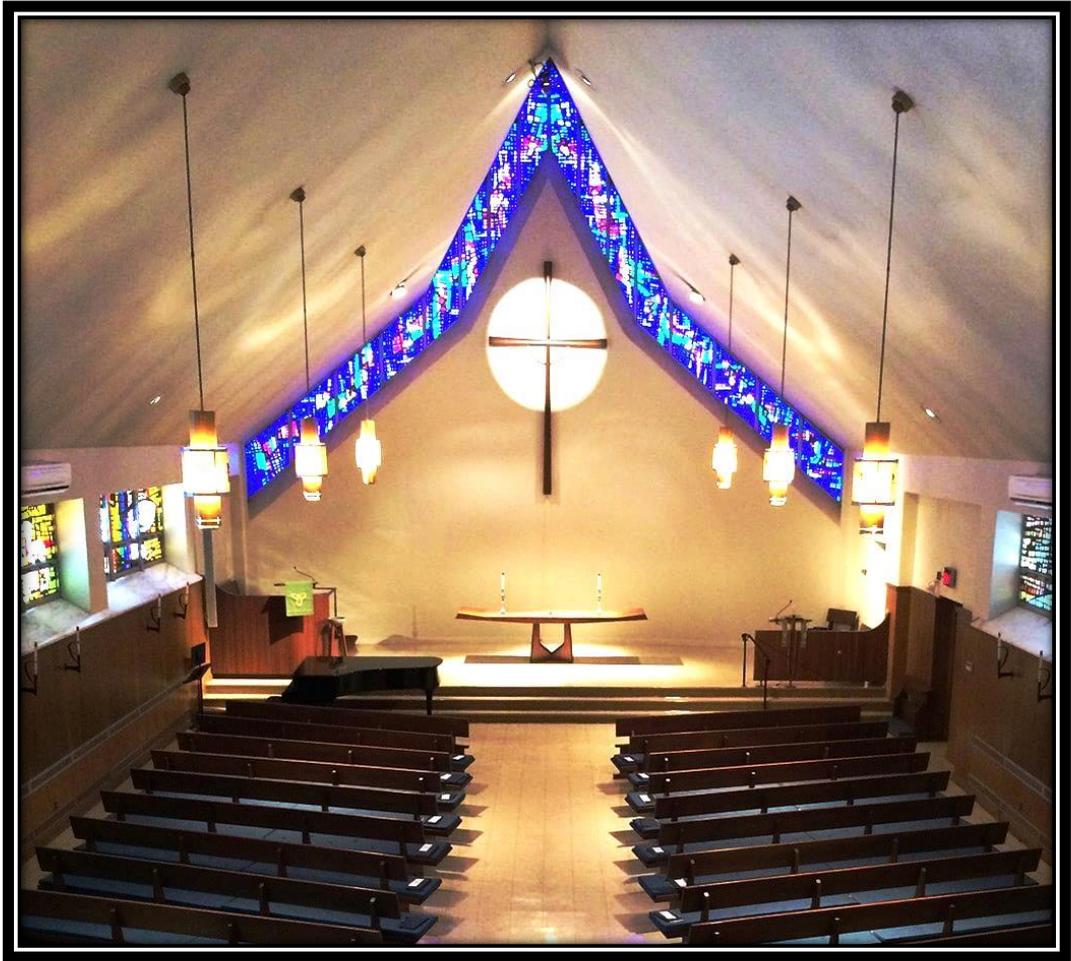
5299 Jamesville Road
DeWitt, New York 13214



*Honor and Majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his
sanctuary.*

✦ *Psalm 96:6*

*This statement has been prepared by The Reverend Forster Freeman, founding pastor of
Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church.*



Every structure has a message. It tells something about the people who designed and occupy it, and about their relationship with the rest of the world. This message is revealed by both the outside and inside appearances.

The intention of this congregation was to present to members and outsiders an exterior that would arrest attention, proclaim some of the feeling of the Christian faith, and draw them inward with a sense of welcome. The principal visible construction material is natural stone (rather than man-made brick), massively, yet gracefully, assembled to suggest the fortress-strength and beauty of God. The façade's lines point the attention of the viewer upward toward higher awareness. It is marked by the

cross, Christian symbol for the self-giving love of God for man. The style is in the contemporary idiom to intimate that here may be found fresh insight and power relevant to real life, rather than the stale odor of dogmatic churchiness from a former era.

The broad lawns, tasteful landscaping and sign, hospitable parking lot and clear glass openness of the entrance, all indicate the welcome which awaits all who come to the house of the Lord. The feeling is reaffirmed by the light narthex where worshippers greet one another, and by the desk for guest registry and for the memorial gifts book. The openness of the narthex glass also reminds the people leaving services or other gatherings that the inspiration received in making their inward journey with others must bear practical fruit as they return to the outer world.

The interior of the sanctuary was designed to help make vivid the divine-human encounter and the communion relationship of people who gather here in grateful adoration or in earnest seeking. The more masculine feeling of the exterior contrasts with the interior qualities of openness, color and warmth.

The people worship while facing east, from which the sun's light dawns, and which for all cultures has meant the direction of divine illumination and life. The roof line within our vision angles upward to lift our consciousness and aspiration. The interior lighting combined with these features is subdued, suggesting a hush of mysterious presence, consciously or unconsciously, the reality of Jacob's "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven," or the Psalmist's "Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him, bless his name!"

The dominant symbol as one faces the front of the church is the Celtic cross centered under the upward-sweeping east window. This type of cross is associated with Presbyterianism and its roots in Scotland and Ireland. Care was taken to avoid a proliferation of crosses around the building, so that this symbol would not become a decoration but keep its striking poignancy.

The single large cross resoundingly proclaims the unfathomable redeeming love that is revealed to us by Christ's sacrifice and triumph, and the response that it requires from us. It is empty of body, unlike a crucifix, to emphasize the resurrection victory which is

ever more important than the crucifixion – actually, the central fact of the Christian faith. Its dominant lines are of man’s vertical dependence and guidance and his human horizontal relationships. The ring, or nimbus, is incorporated in this form of the cross to represent the completeness of God’s love, or eternal life, or the whole Self, being without beginning or ending. It is similar to the halo or aura of light seen by physically sensitive people around some persons and objects.

Since the circle is divided into four quadrants, it is in keeping with the various forms of the mandala that appear in all world religions and depth psychology studies (the “reconciling symbol which will bring the opposing qualities of the psyche together”.) Examples are the sun, the Holy City New Jerusalem, the four Evangelists with Christ at the center, early esoteric Christianity’s carnal, natural, spiritual and divine bodies, corresponding to stages of development; the lotus-cosmos and the Wheel of Universal Law which symbolizes the eight-fold path of Buddhist teaching; the Taoists Gold Flower; the Navaho four-petal universe; the quaternity of basic elements; compass points; seasons; and Jungian personality types.

As the cross reminds us of the incarnate Word, the other furnishings of the chancel extend this motif. These two are partly wrought in silver, enduring metal of beauty and preciousness, emblem of divine truth and of delight in perceiving it.

The lectern on the right is for the reading of the written Word, the “native language” of which is largely a symbol (poetry; parable; myth, in the non-disparaging potent sense). The intuitive faculty makes response to symbolic accounts even more fully than the reasoning mind does. This lectern is distinctive in that it is subtly in the shape of a sword. “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword...” (Her. 4:12) “I saw...one like a son of man...from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword...” (Rev. 1:13,16). Across the chancel is the pulpit at which the proclaimed Word gives current-day application of the written message.

Central to the chancel, joining the cross as the focal worship center, is the communion table. The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is spread here on fair linen to be shared by all in the community of faith, to nourish them inwardly as they receive the bread of the Lord’s own goodness and drink in the wine of the truth which He is. The clergy and elder seat themselves at the rear and ends of the table while administering the

Sacrament to help all the members of the congregation feel that they are gathered there, together with believers in the entire Holy Catholic Church.

Four candles are on the table, recalling the repeated Biblical instances of four or forty connected with cleansing or preparation. The warmth and light of their flames further impress us with the love and truth of Him who is the light of the world and of our souls. These lights are multiplied on festive occasions by the two standing seven stemmed candelabra. Flowers are usually present to help show forth the beauty of Him and of devotion to Him.

The traditional three steps lead from the nave to the chancel. The number three is suggestive not only of the Holy Trinity, but also body, mind and soul; the principle of end, cause and effect; the Neoplatonist good, intelligence and world-soul; and similar recognitions in the other world religions, such as the Hindu Brahma, Siva and Vishnu. This number as applied to these steps indicates the need for complete preparation in approach to the holy worship center.

A child or adult approaches the silver-baptismal font – in order to be cleansed, engrafted to Christ and welcomed into the household of God – by way of the nearby door, which symbolically stands for this act of entering for inclusion. There is an etching of the scallop shell with three drops of water, which have long represented baptism in God's triune name, and a descending dove for the baptism of the Holy Spirit which may follow the one with water. Tradition has it that John the Baptist poured water over Jesus with a scallop shell, which was also used by holy men to collect offerings. Water, on which physical life depends, was referred to by Jesus as a symbol of His gift of Everlasting life.

The sacristy, the small room at the right of the chancel, is a place of preparation: of flowers, linens and communion elements. The clergy not only vest themselves here, but also prepare prayerfully for leading others in worship. The sacristy prayer used by Martin Luther hangs beside the door.

The organ and choirs are located in the loft at the rear, rather than the front, because their function is not to put on a performance to please others, but to give support to the congregation's praising of the Lord through the beauty of music.

Paraments appropriate to the seasons of the Christian year are hung at the pulpit and lectern to enrich the soul's response through the significance of both color and design:

Violet – displayed during Advent and Lent. The color symbolizes humility, penitence, suffering, kingliness.

The pulpit scarf design is a shield containing IHC, the first three letters of the Greek name, Jesus. One Bible marker displays the Greek letter Alpha, and the other Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. This signifies that the Lord is “the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

White – displayed during Christmastide, Epiphany, Eastertide, weddings. The color symbolizes the Lord's light purity, glory, perfection.

The pulpit scarf shows an anchor cross, indicating our hope in Christ. This includes again the alpha and omega. It also shows the Greek letters *xi* and *rho*, first two in the name, Christ; these letters are shown as well on the suspended lighting fixtures. The Old Testament marker is designated with the creator's star, emblem of God, suggesting His six-fold attributes, and also the Holy Trinity. These interpenetrating triangles occur in various world religions to show the union of opposite traits within each of us, or the union of the soul with God. On the New Testament marker is the vine with its branches, for the relationship between Christ and His disciples.

Red – displayed on Pentecost, Thanksgiving, Reformation Sunday and All Saints Day. The color symbolized the Lord's sacrificial love, blood, martyrdom.

Embroidered on the pulpit scarf is a representation of the seven tongued flame of the Holy Spirit. On the Old Testament marker is the form of David's harp, for joyful worship on the New Testament marker, wheat and weeds, for the mixed faithfulness of the Church.

Green – displayed from Trinity to Advent. The color symbolizes nature, growth, the renewed life.

The triquetra at the pulpit signifies the Holy Trinity. On the Old and New Testament markers are the two tablets of the Ten Commandments, and a lamp for Jesus, “the light of the world.”

The etched glass panels which separate the nave from the lounge display two sections of designs.

Those on the three center panels are taken from the United Presbyterian seal: the burning bush of Moses; the Greek motto, “Jesus Christ Conquer” (IC XC NIKA), with the cross and orb of the world, divided in parts representing Jerusalem, Judea, and the Samaria; and the open bible with the Greek letters *Zambda* and *theta*, meaning “Word of God”, intersected by the arrow of martyrdom which includes the alpha and omega. The other two parts of the denominational seal, the Celtic cross and the descending dove, are excluded from these panels because they may be found elsewhere in the room.



The second section of etchings is divided evenly on the two panels to each side. These are the emblems of the four evangelists, four winged creatures – the man for Matthew, lion for Mark, ox for Luke, and the eagle for John – since these writers stressed, concerning Jesus, His humanity, royalty, sacrifice, divinity.



The colored windows are made of faceted (chipped) inch-thick glass set in a matrix of epoxy resin. The faceting produces a jewel-like quality whose beauty constantly changes in variations of depth as the exterior light alters.

The slit windows that follow the roof line in the chancel wall represent no story or picture, but provide a striking ministry of color. They have been filled with predominantly blue glass. This calming hue, associated with spiritual evolution and celestial verity, also signifies the dedicated will. The vibration from the windows, as from the sky that God arches over us, brings intuitively an uplifting response.

There are seven nave aisle windows. Students of esoteric wisdom recognize the number seven, like three, particularly to convey holiness and completeness. Hence, it corresponds with the decades of Jewish captivity; the seventy weeks of years of preparation for the coming of the Messiah; the number of times to forgive the sins of another; the Asian churches and many other occurrences of the number in Revelation; the days of the week and the sabbatical year; the menorah; the colors of the spectrum; the cardinal sins and virtues; the psychic centers of the body; the womb-caves of the Aztecs; the cities of Cibola; the American Indians kiva within a pueblo and worlds through which man climbs on his evolutionary journey – similar also to Buddhist and Taoist cosmography.

These seven windows abstractly represent the symbolic (not scientific) account of the days of creation as described in Genesis I. They also can be taken to mean the stages of mankind's, and the individual persons' regeneration.

As one sits in a pew, he sees the first window at the front right and the others following in clockwise order:

Day 1. The hand of God is separating the light from the darkness. This corresponds to one's initial step on the Way – dimly “seeing the light,” which makes possible the decision to choose the upward way toward union with Him who is the light of the world.



Day 2. God establishes the firmament (ancient man's concept of a sky canopy) and waters above it, and also the waters beneath the earth. The window suggests some of the chaotic power of our unordered feelings as we begin on the path of spiritual enlightenment. Water is generally associated with the unconscious mind, or with spirit; in this case generally being settled, and differentiating between rational ability and spiritual or intuitive perception, external and internal, earthly and heavenly, tap water and a well-spring of eternal life.



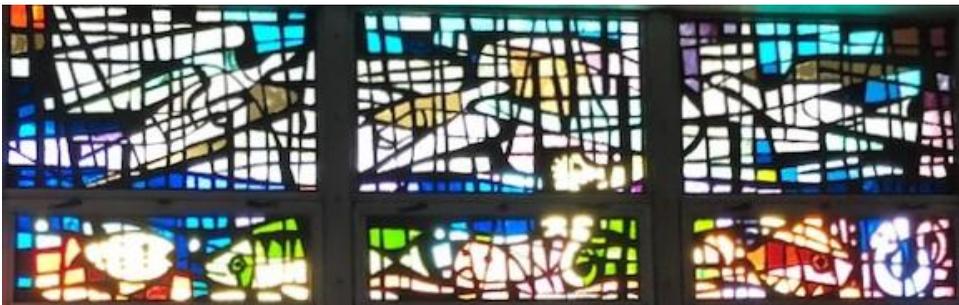
Day 3. Emerging from the sea come dry land and its fruits, suggested in the glass by a lily and wheat and grapes. It is the beginning of productivity, living for a usefulness beyond oneself, and knowing thankfully that the source of one's fruits is deep in the vine to which we as branches are attached. The wheat and grapes, of course, we associate with the Lord's Supper.



Day 4. Stars, moon and sun are created. Our understanding expands from the multitudinous dots of partial insight, configured to convey mysterious wisdom in darkness; to the broader light of cool perception; approaching eventually the life so enlightened that it sheds everywhere the warmth of love.



Day 5. The living creatures of water and air emerge, animated and more finely tuned than their predecessors in the mineral and vegetable realms. Fish signify lively, applicable faith within the medium of understanding in our shallows and our depths. Birds represent more elevated views that come with freer, lighter, less self-conscious movement.



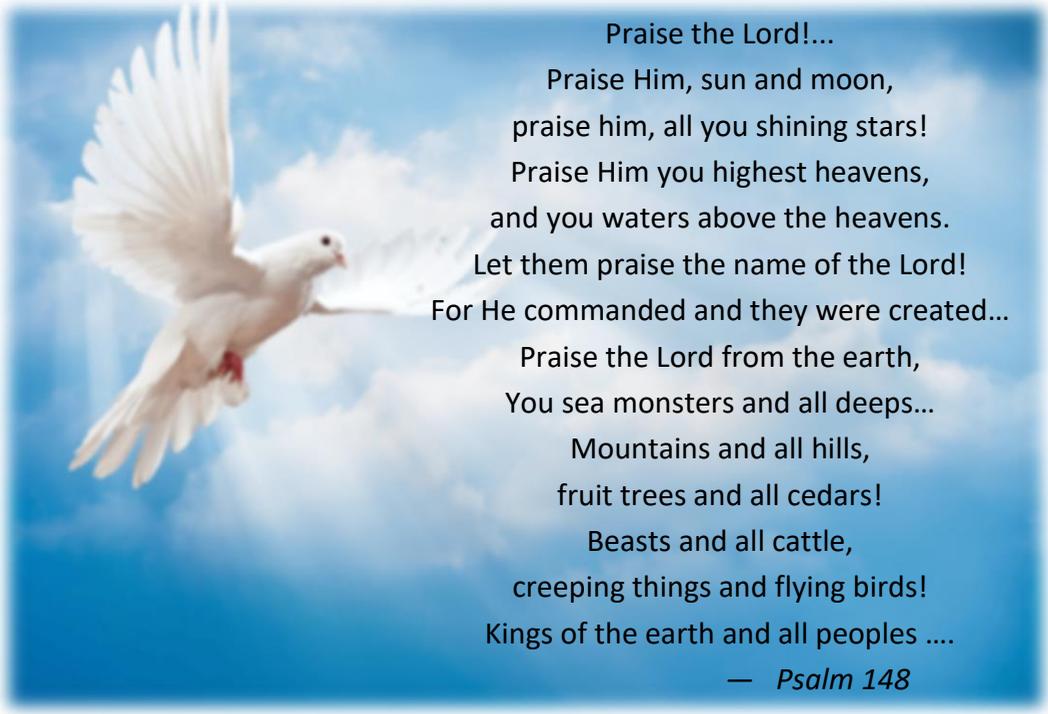
Day 6. God causes the earth to produce warm-blooded animals, including His supreme creation permitted to be in His own image: man, male and female. These take us beyond the conceptualizing of faith to add the much more important responses of abandoning to God the will and affection. One who exercises these faculties thereby becomes most fully human in Christ-consciousness, most fully God-with-us while acting in the world. The lamb here represents not only the lower animals, but also Jesus, who so emptied Himself of ego-will that His divine power paradoxically became victoriously released through sacrifice. Therefore, the window intimates this same nature that we must discover within ourselves as we behold the Lamb of God.



Day 7. The number stands for completeness. As the process of earth's evolution and of human development has moved toward wholeness, God adds the final element. Since life is more than labor, God provides for rest, praise and ecstasy in union. The rainbow depicts God's colorful covenant – relationship with man which He promised. This window also abstractly stretched, God's gift of His own Spirit, life abundant.

All parts of nature are parts of us. As we discover the integration of all creation, God appears everywhere around within ourselves, and we are one with Him.





Praise the Lord!...
Praise Him, sun and moon,
praise him, all you shining stars!
Praise Him you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens.
Let them praise the name of the Lord!
For He commanded and they were created...
Praise the Lord from the earth,
You sea monsters and all deeps...
Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars!
Beasts and all cattle,
creeping things and flying birds!
Kings of the earth and all peoples
— *Psalm 148*

“We shape our buildings and then our buildings shape us.” — *Winston Churchill*

A symbol “opens levels of reality which otherwise are hidden and cannot be grasped in any other way.”



“The decrease in sacramental thinking and feeling in the churches of the Reformation and in the American denominations is appalling. Nature has lost its religious meaning and is excluded from participation in the power of salvation; the sacraments have lost their spiritual power and are vanishing in the consciousness of most Protestants; the Christ is interpreted as a religious personality and not as the basic sacramental reality, the “New Being.” The protestant protest has rightly destroyed the magical elements in Catholic sacramentalism but has wrongly brought in the verge of disappearance the sacramental foundation of Christianity and with it the religious foundation of the protest itself. It should be a permanent task of Christian theology, of preaching and of church leadership to draw the line between the spiritual and the magical use of the

sacramental element, for this element is the one essential element of every religion, namely, the presence of the divine before our acting and striving, in a “structure of grace” and in the symbols expressing it. C.G. Jung has called the history of Protestantism a history of continuous “iconoclasm” (“the destruction of pictures,” that is, of religious symbols) and consequently, the separation of our consciousness from the universally human “archetypes” that are present in the subconscious of everybody. He is right. Protestants often confuse the essential symbols with accidental signs. They are often unaware of the numinous power inherent in genuine symbols, words, acts, persons, things. They have replaced the great wealth of symbols appearing in the Christian tradition by rational concepts, moral laws, and subjective emotions.”

— *Paul Tillich*





“The Sower”, the ceramic relief sculpture which graces the west wall of our church lounge, was created by member, Gary Quirk, under the commission of Pebble Hill’s 40th Anniversary Committee. The sculpture was modeled in Gary’s Syracuse studio, using stoneware and clay.

From the artist:

“I selected the Parable of the Sower as my subject after reflecting upon the many conversations I’ve had over the years about the design elements at Pebble Hill. Our attention in worship is lifted heavenward by the very structure of the sanctuary. The high side windows and uplifted ends of the communion table assist in the worshipful gesture created by space. We use the lounge to greet the world and each other after worship. We may stay to study the word, or at other times gather for committee work. I thought that the solid grounding of good soil and mindfulness of the ways of the world could be a helpful image in this space.”

— Gary Quirk

The sculpture was dedicated October 18, 1998