

# How Lovely Thy Dwelling Place



**First Presbyterian Church  
211 Garfield Avenue  
London, Ohio 43140**

## **HOW LOVELY THY DWELLING PLACE!**

*A sermon explaining the design, furnishings and symbols of the new Sanctuary  
of First Presbyterian Church of London, Ohio  
originally preached by its pastor, Gordon E. Johnson, on April 18, 1982*

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## **HOW LOVELY THY DWELLING PLACE!**

*(Preached by Pastor Gordon E. Johnson on Dedication Sunday, April 18, 1982 and on his final Church Anniversary Sunday in London, September 24, 2017)*

|                      |                                      |                            |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| <u>Old Testament</u> | “King Solomon’s Temple”              | I Kings 6:11-38            |
| <u>Psalter</u>       | “How Lovely is God’s Dwelling Place” | Psalms 84:1-4              |
| <u>Epistle</u>       | “John’s Vision of Heaven”            | Revelation 21:10-11, 18-21 |
| <u>Gospel</u>        | “Mary’s Extravagant Memorial”        | Matthew 26:6-13            |

### **INTRODUCTION:**

It took 480 years after God had freed the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt for them to build God a temple—an earthly dwelling place—a house where they might meet with Him and worship Him. God challenged His people, through King Solomon, to build the greatest and most magnificent temple ever known to that day-- a place that would say to all around them, “This is the most important aspect of our life and culture-- the God we worship!” This grand temple built by Solomon serves as the original example and model for places of worship. It also set a precedent-- not only is there a legitimate need but there is also the right, yea, even the duty of God’s people to construct lovely places for the earthly habitation of God where his people might gather to worship Him. With the psalmist, God’s people should be able to say, “How lovely is thy dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts!” Surely we can say that of this temple of His!

But some may say, “This is too lovely! It is too elaborate!” Too lovely? Too elaborate, in comparison to King Solomon’s temple with which God was well pleased?

Some may say, “What a waste! It is too extravagant!” A waste? Too extravagant, in comparison to Mary’s perfume poured over Jesus’ head-- the cost of which was a worker’s annual salary? “But the money represented by this extravagance,” these same critics might continue, “could have been given to the poor!” St. John, who also records the story of Mary’s extravagant anointing with perfume, states that the one who made a similar comment about the perfume wasn’t really concerned about the poor, but had his own selfish, greedy concerns. Furthermore, a church such as this one, which, for the last half a century has given, every year, 30-40% of current receipts, off the top, for all kinds of benevolent causes beyond its church doors, is not woefully neglecting the needy.

Still other critics may say, “Too gorgeous! Much too gorgeous!” Too gorgeous, in comparison to St. John’s vision of God’s heavenly home?

When we consider our three Scripture lessons this morning (about Solomon’s Temple, Mary’s Perfume, and Heaven), certainly, by comparison, this house of God is not too elaborate, too extravagant, or too gorgeous! And further, who is to say, “God does not deserve it,” for this is His house! When He comes to us here in corporate worship, as He has promised to do, shall we not meet Him in a place worthy of His presence? We have lovely edifices in every other area of our life and culture-- lovely homes and schools, libraries and hospitals, gymnasiums and stadiums, shopping malls and government buildings, etc. Why not lovely churches? What really

is important to us? What about priorities? This lovely temple says to the people of London that the God we Presbyterians worship is worthy of the finest we can provide! He is important to us! He deserves this and more, much more! We are serious about Him and our relationship to Him!

I have no doubt that God is as excited and pleased about this temple of His as He was about King Solomon's Temple! Further, this early dwelling of His does not seem to be out of line with the dwelling place God has prepared for us in heaven. And when some may say, "Why this waste?" I seem to hear Jesus say (as He did of Mary), "What a fine, beautiful memorial!" "How lovely is thy dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts!"

Now as King Solomon in our Old Testament lesson took us on a tour through the magnificent temple which the children of Israel built for God, so I would have you tour with me through this temple which the people of God in this place built for Him in 1982.

## **I. NARTHEX**

- A. As we enter the narthex, (the area on the other side of the glass doors at the rear of the Sanctuary), two lovely stained glass windows catch our eyes. They are called The Creation Windows.
  1. The first one depicts The Creation.
    - a. We can see the Hand of God reaching down from the firmament, . .
    - b. . . .creating the Round Earth below.
    - c. Green is the dominant color in the Earth, signifying life, for God is the creator of life! We note also a Plant with Green Leaves growing up from the Earth signifying life and growth.
    - d. Within the Earth, plain to see, is a Triangle, reminding us that God is so concerned about His creation, Earth, that He has placed His three-fold presence (as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) within His creation.
    - e. The artist of the window has used Light Shades of Color at the top and Dark Shades of Color at the bottom to remind us that it was out of darkness that God created light.
  2. The second window portrays The Biblical Elements of Creation.
    - a. The blue Clouds above (symbolizing air)
    - b. The red, yellow and orange Flames (symbolizing fire)
    - c. The blue Waves below (symbolizing water)
    - d. The Swatches of Brown and Green at the bottom (symbolizing earth)

- e. Again we note the contrast of Dark and Light Shades of Color. The Dark Shades of Color below represent night, and the Light Shades of Color above represent day, for God separated the light from the darkness and the light He called day and the darkness He called night.

These two beautiful windows in the Narthex remind us that the God we come to worship is the Creator of all life and all the elements of life! Therefore, we enter His house singing, "Praise ye the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!... All ye who hear, now to His temple draw near; join me in glad adoration!"

## II. SANCTUARY

### A. The Architecture

Upon entering the sanctuary, one is awe-struck. The architect did a marvelous job in carefully following the study paper provided by our church's planning committee. The opening section of that study paper reads:

"We believe that in a church's area of worship there is a unique opportunity through tangible and outward means of bringing people of faith to a closer and more real sense of the presence of the living God. Certainly we do not intimate that God is confined to a building. But scriptural guideposts present abundant evidence that we think of God in terms of a God who dwells in the heavens, who dwells among His people, and who dwells in the House of the Lord (where His people are called together to worship Him). It is in this way, by the use of pleasing proportions and forms, honest design, simple beauty, materials of warmth and light, a physical place of holiness will arise in which the glory and goodness of God's love is felt, and the unseen (God) is made real and near. No sense of coldness, darkness, or of cluttered confusion should exist to detract from the truth, light, and grace of God's gifts, namely His Son, His Word, His Spirit."

The architect has materialized-well the committee's thoughts! On first entering this Sanctuary people have been heard to say: "It's so warm and inviting, so worshipful and peaceful!" "You can feel God's presence!" And one little pre-school child simply said, "W-O-W!"

### B. The Ceiling

1. One of the first things which impresses us is the high and lofty ceiling reminding us that our Lord is high and lifted up and that our thoughts and prayers in this place should also be high and lifted up to Him.
2. It is not difficult to see in the design of the ceiling the bottom of a boat or a ship. A ship has long been a symbol for the church-- an appropriate symbol, for the mast, which holds steady a ship in a storm, is in the form of a Cross. It is the Christ of the Cross who holds steady the church

as it sails on the turbulent waters of a world that is often disturbed by the church's message Christ calls it to proclaim.

### III. NAVE

A. The nave is the area where the congregation worships. The main symbols in the nave are, of course, to be found in the beautiful Stained Glass Windows on the south side which have been designed to portray the Church Year.

1. Since the church year is based on the person of Jesus, the first symbol we note is the Fish-- in fact, three large fish. The fish was an ancient secret symbol for Jesus. The Christians, during the times of persecution, used this symbol as a way of identifying themselves and others as Christians. They even used the fish like arrows, to point the way in the catacombs to their secret places for worship.

Why the Fish? The word fish in Greek is IXΘΥC. Each letter (I, X, Θ, Y, C) is the first letter of a Greek word comprising this phrase: Jesus Christ God's Son Savior. Why three fish? It was to identify Jesus as part of the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). Jesus is God the Son. As in the early catacombs, our three fish point us to the chancel area, the focal point of our worship.

2. A second thing we note about the windows is that the Colors Go From Dark to Light. Even as God created light out of darkness, even so God, in worship, seeks through Jesus Christ to lift us from darkness of sin into the light of new life. There is also a practical reason for this shade change. Moving from dark to light tends to pull the focus of the worshiper forward to the chancel, our worship center.

3. Let us now behold in the windows, the Church Year based on phases of Jesus's life:--

a. The church year begins with Advent-- the fourth Sunday before Christmas. Advent is the season of preparation for the coming of Christ. The symbol is the Tau Cross (Tau is the Greek letter for "T"). The Tau Cross is also called the Anticipatory Cross-- anticipating the promise of salvation, coming in Jesus Christ. The shape of this Cross (T) is believed to be the shape of the serpent cross that Moses lifted up in the wilderness, which was used to save God's people from sin and death. In John 3:14, that "Moses-event" is paralleled to Jesus being lifted up on a Cross, to save people from sin and death. The Tau Cross is the Anticipatory Cross-- anticipating the coming of the Savior!

b. The promise of salvation is fulfilled when the Savior arrives (Christmas!) The Cradle reminds us of the humble birth of Jesus (meaning "Savior") who was laid in a manger.

c. The next season of the Church Year is called Epiphany, meaning manifestation. Jesus is manifested, or revealed, as "Lord."

- 1). Jesus' Lordship was manifested first to gentiles (non-Jews). The wise men who followed the Star to Bethlehem were non-Jews seeking to find and worship the one who was born to be King of the Jews. The wise men actually arrived sometime after the birth (as much as two years later). Therefore, the wise men do not rightly belong at the manger scene with the shepherds. As early as the second century Epiphany was celebrated 12 days after Christmas.
  - 2). Jesus' Lordship was also manifested to the Jews, for Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan and the announcement from heaven was made to the Jewish people who were present, "This is my beloved Son." The Scallop Shell is an old symbol for baptism. It reminds us of Jesus's baptism and ours. (Baptism is the first of two sacraments we celebrate.) After his baptism, Jesus began his three-year ministry.
- d. The next season of the Church Year is Lent. During Lent we concentrate on the outpouring of Jesus' life in ministry to the people which inevitably led him to his suffering and death-- symbolized by the Chalice. On the night before his death, Jesus took the cup (chalice) and told his disciples that this was to remind them of his blood poured out for the sins of the world. (This also reminds us of the second sacrament we celebrate--Holy Communion.) Jesus died on Good Friday.
  - e. But, praise be to God, Jesus conquered sin and death by rising from the grave on that first Easter morn! The symbol is the Triumphant (Sunburst) Cross, an empty cross (for he is no longer dead) with the sun bursting behind it (symbolizing the sunrise of a new day; . .the Resurrection; . .new life).
  - f. For 40 days after the Resurrection, Jesus tarried with his disciples and then ascended into heaven (Ascension Day) to sit at the right hand of God the Father where he is crowned (Crown) King of kings and Lord of lords!
  - g. Ten days after Christ's Ascension, on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit, (often symbolized in Scripture in the form of a Dove), descended upon the disciples from heaven. About 3,000 persons were baptized and the New Testament Church was born!
  - h. The Sunday following Pentecost is Trinity Sunday and begins the long Season of Trinity (sometimes called the Season of Kingdom-tide). The equilateral Triangle is, perhaps, the most common symbol for the Trinity, reminding us that God has revealed Himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Season of Trinity continues until Advent, when we begin a new Church Year.

- B. Behind the congregation in worship, looking over our shoulders, though unseen, is the one who has promised never to leave us nor forsake us-- Jesus, The Good Shepherd. Even though we do not see him, it is always comforting to know he is always here, for the Good Shepherd does not forsake his sheep! He looks after them and cares for them until finally he gathers them into his eternal fold! (This is the fourth home for the Good Shepherd Window (Main Street, Walnut Street, Fellowship Hall, and here.)
- C. A final thing we note in the nave is the Canted (Slanted) Pews. The Reformed-Presbyterian concept of Christian worship is that the people gather together as a corporate act to worship God. Therefore, the canted pews give us a gathered together feeling of involvement, rather than that of an audience viewing a performance. Wherever worship-action is taking place in the chancel area, we all have the feeling of gathering together around that particular area and being a part of that action. Furthermore, the canted pews enable us to see more faces rather than backs of heads, for the fellowship of the gathered worshipers is also very important.

#### IV. CHANCEL

- A. As we approach the chancel area, we note that three steps take us there-- three, reminding us of the Trinity.
- B. There are also three main pieces of chancel furniture-- the Baptismal Font, the Communion Table, and the Pulpit. John Calvin, the founder of our Reformed- Presbyterian tradition, stated in his Institutes of the Christian Religion: “Wherever we find the word of God preached, and the sacraments (Baptism and Communion) administered according to the institution of Christ, there, it is not to be doubted, is a Church of God.” The Church, then, is the people of God gathered together to hear through preaching what God has to say and to receive through the sacraments what God has to give. Therefore, the three main pieces of furniture in the chancel are: the Pulpit, for the spoken word of God through preaching; the Baptismal Font and the Communion Table, for the giving of God’s grace through the sacraments.
  1. The Baptismal Font is where we celebrate the first of two sacraments, Holy Baptism. Baptism is both a christening and an initiation: a christening in that we are given, at baptism, Christ’s name and are called Christian; and an initiation, for it is through baptism that we enter the Church. Therefore, the baptismal font is placed on the level of the people, reminding us that we enter the church and approach the table through baptism. All baptized Christians are welcome at the table. The symbol on the font is the Descending Dove, reminding us of the Holy Spirit who descended like a dove on Jesus at his baptism and who descends on us at our baptism-- God, the Holy Spirit, coming to us.
  2. The Communion Table is where we celebrate the second sacrament, Holy Communion. Here we recall the loving sacrifice of Christ in the giving of his body and the shedding of his blood for our sins. And here

we receive him anew each time we come to his Table. We feed on him; we partake of him; we are filled anew with his living, life-giving presence. The symbol on the table is A and Ω (the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet). Jesus is the first and the last, the beginning and the end. No higher title is given to Jesus in all of Scripture, for this title identifies him inseparably with God, the first and the last of all time and all things, the true beginning and the true end-- God, the Son, coming to us in the bread and the wine!

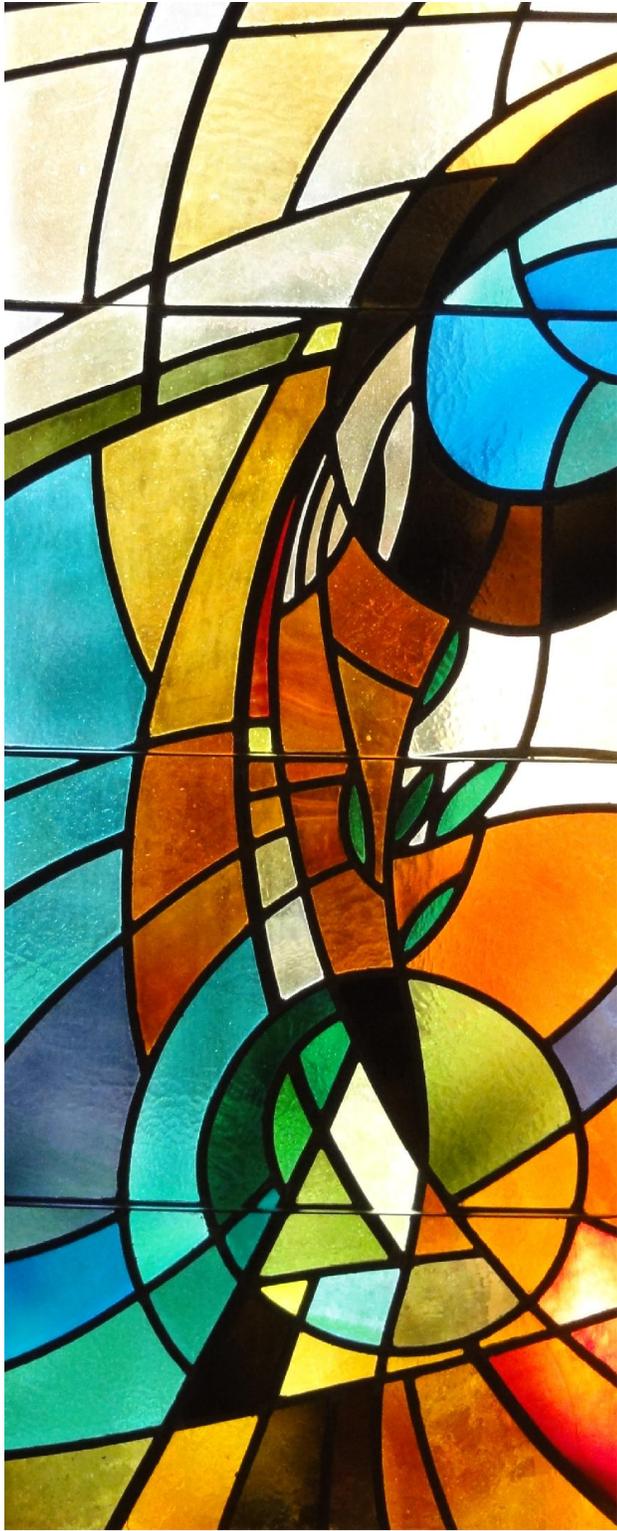
- a. One other thing we notice in the chancel area is the Sanctuary Lamp. The Candle, symbolizing Jesus, the Light of the World, is always lit, reminding us of the eternal presence of Christ. He is always with us!
3. The Pulpit is primarily used for the preaching of the Word. While the sacraments tell us what God has to give us-- [in baptism, a new name (Christian) and a new family (the Christian Church); in communion God gives us new life and fellowship in Christ]-- preaching tells us what God has to say to us. Through prayer and study and more prayer the preacher struggles to rid his/her mind of his/her own thoughts and ideas and listen to what God would say through him/her as God's spokesman in the pulpit. True preaching is God's Word, not the preacher's! The symbol on the pulpit of the Hand stands for God the Creator, reaching down to create and direct and sustain our hearts and lives-- God, the Father, coming to us through the written and spoken word! Again, please note that wherever the action is taking place in the chancel area-- as God gives to us at the font or table, or as He speaks to us from the pulpit-- we have the gathered-around feeling as His worshiping people. This effect is also enhanced by the location and position of the choir. The choir is not centered or too highly elevated (in fact the first row is lowered) because the choir does not put on a performance but assists the congregation in singing, and also sings on behalf of the congregation or God. The positioning of the choir (canted and to one side) helps complete the gathered-around effect.

None of the three main pieces of furniture in the chancel area are more prominent than any other. Each has its own prominence for the preaching of the Word and the Sacraments are of equal importance in the Reformed-Presbyterian tradition.

- C. All attention in this house of God is drawn to the Cross-- the center of our Christian Faith-- reminding us of our sin and God's love. When our pipe organ was installed in 2003, the installer carefully designed the lay-out of the pipes so they would not divert but actually direct eye-attention toward the cross. It is a Celtic Cross with the familiar circle in the center. While the original meaning of the circle is not really known, it is believed to symbolize Christ's eternal victory over sin and death. It also reminds us that God's love encompasses the whole world. This form of the cross emerged in

the British Isles in the seventh century and was widely used, early on, by the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, our Mother Church.

- D. Finally, the Processional Cross was introduced in our worship service in 1982. Since the cross of Christ is the center of our faith, it is indeed appropriate that it leads us into worship and back out into the world again. That old favorite hymn puts it well: “Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before.” For too many years we Protestants shied away from anything that looked Roman Catholic. There was a time we wouldn’t even have a cross on the steeple of the church or on the altar or table for that was Roman Catholic. We even rejected the idea of being called “catholic,” (which literally means universal or general), and some still refuse to say in the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe in the holy catholic church.” And certainly it is true today that many Protestants wouldn’t be caught dead wearing a crucifix-- that’s Roman Catholic! So, too, some have been slow in accepting the processional cross leading us into worship and back out again into the world. “With the cross of Jesus going on before!”-- “Going on before us”-- leading us as we enter God’s house to worship and leading us out as we go forth from worship to serve. May the procession of the cross always remind us of the One whom we are called together to worship and whom we are also called to share with the world! If our worship of God in this lovely dwelling does not lead us to go forth and share Him with the world, our worship is in vain! “Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim, till all the world adore his sacred name.” Amen.

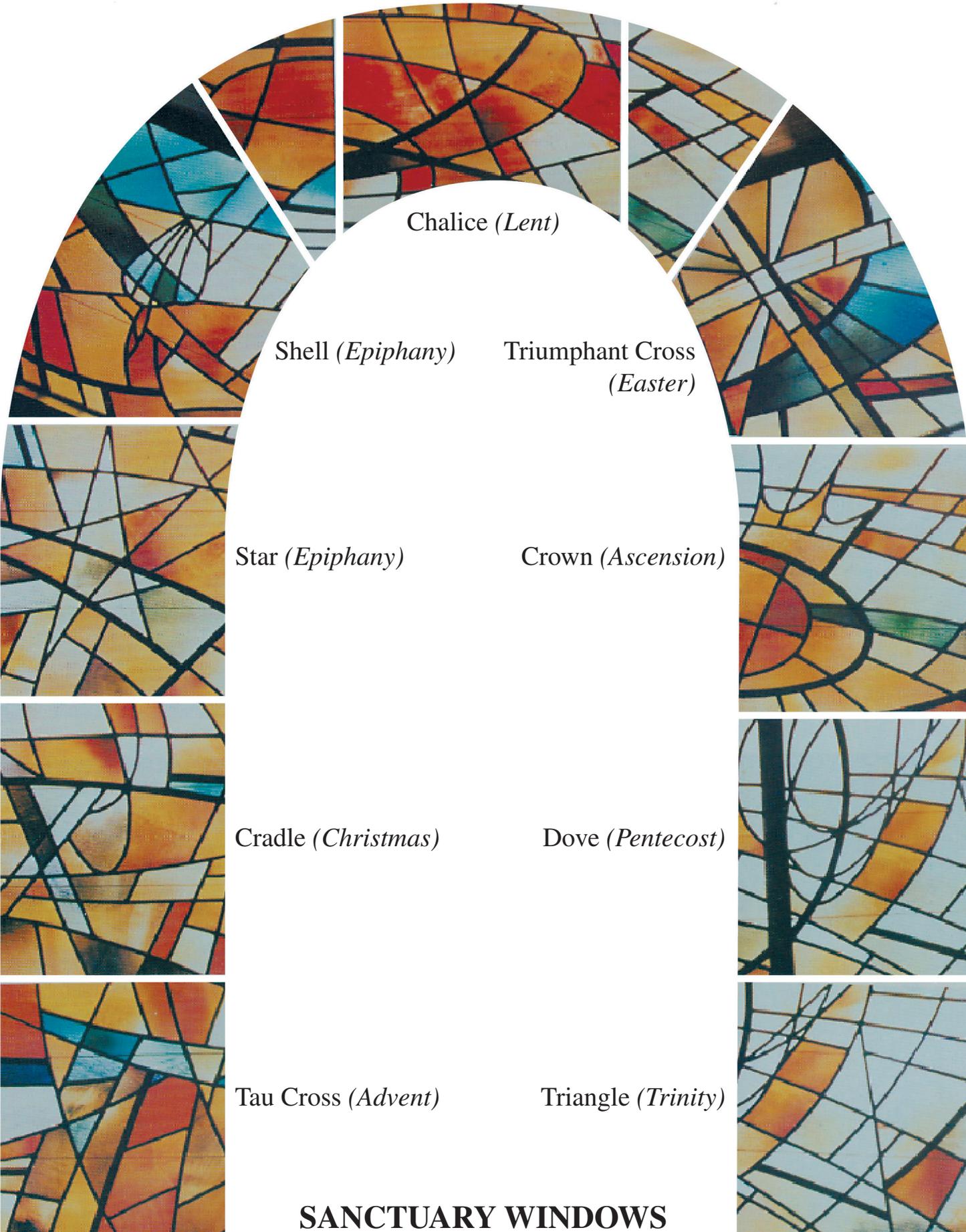


The Creation  
*(God's hand, earth, plant, triangle)*



Biblical Elements of Creation  
*(air, fire, water, earth)*

**NARTHEX WINDOWS**



Chalice (*Lent*)

Shell (*Epiphany*)

Triumphant Cross  
(*Easter*)

Star (*Epiphany*)

Crown (*Ascension*)

Cradle (*Christmas*)

Dove (*Pentecost*)

Tau Cross (*Advent*)

Triangle (*Trinity*)

**SANCTUARY WINDOWS**  
(*based on the church year*)