

A NEW PROCESSIONAL CROSS FOR GOOD SHEPHERD

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by

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The art committee at Good Shepherd asked me to propose a design using local materials, including a fossil, and connecting a new processional cross to our local environment. Once we were in conversation, the committee suggested some of the specific design elements you see in the finished cross. Several other elements were developed as Harley and I worked on the project.

Here are what some of the elements of our processional cross mean to me.

First, the cross is meant to be carried, as the original cross was. The staff for this particular cross is re-purposed: a very old garden rake handle and a repurposed iron bar extension. I wanted, in the staff, a look and feel of having been used before, though the metal has been gilded for its new, repurposed life.

Second, the gastropod fossil at the heart of the cross, picked up by Norma Refsal on the banks of the Upper Iowa, is over 400 million years old. It is a reminder, to me, of the opening of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The beautiful symmetry of this ancient piece of rock is a reminder of the order at work in our world's beginning.

Third, the design is a cross on a cross. The slender cross is a visual reminder of the body on the original cross. This central cross is made of red cedar, an aromatic wood prized for its resistance to rot and insects. Local red cedars, growing on rock bluff edges, have been ring dated as the oldest trees in our area, some over 400 years old. Cedars were also part of Jesus' world: the kind of timber used in Solomon's temple in Jerusalem and in fishing boats for Lake Galilee. Our local cedar has core wood the color of flesh and blood. The little cedar cross of four members, broken in the center, is fixed with metal nails, recalling those used on the hands and feet of Jesus, and a wooden peg, recalling his crown of thorns. The small cross has arms that fall from the nails toward the center, as Jesus' arms would have done as they bore his weight.

Fourth, other imagery of the cross is meant to connect to baptism. The center design, carved in basswood by Harley and conceived by Jutta Anderson, is a pattern and color that represents water. The clay medallion on the back side of the cross echoes the fossil on the front, but replicates the shell that is part of the clay tile in our baptismal font. The cross was used as a tool of death by Roman authorities and the church of Jesus' day. To Christians, however, it is an instrument of salvation. The cross is therefore a reminder that one view of baptism is a drowning of an old and cursed self, to allow the birth of a washed-new redeemed one.

Fifth, the cross features materials that remind us of our daily surroundings: the river, the rocks, trees such as bur oak, basswood, cedar, and hickory, and the clay of our soil. We practice our life, as followers of Jesus, where we are, and we have to believe that God loves us for the variety and uniqueness of each and every one of us, planted here as we are on the west side of Decorah.

Finally, the elements of the cross are meant to echo the whole of our material life: light, clay, water, and living wood. The cross is meant to be a microcosm of the macrocosm, as in the original, where the human world hung in balance from a trio of nails.

Harley and I thank Good Shepherd for the opportunity to work and express ourselves through this, our gift to the congregation.