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## Monuments of Belief

Deuteronomy 27:1-10

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, August 5, 2018,  
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

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Over the last year or so, monuments have made the news across this country and even in this community. Monuments and their history, purpose, meaning have been points of contention and conflict because erected monuments say something about what people believe, what they value, what they uphold, what they honor and cherish, even what or who they worship. As poet Myra Sklarew says, “Each of us has monuments in the bone case of memory.” We not only build monuments but they build us, shape us, make us, tell us who we are or who we should be. This is why we should pay attention to our monuments. They are a part of the architecture of our lives, in the bone case of our belief systems.

In the bone case of the memory book we call the Bible, we find monuments erected all over the holy writ. In the bone case of our biblical memory of the children of Israel, there are monuments to behold. Often, these monuments are made up of a heap of stones. In the Bible, Jacob and Laban made a heap of stones to “witness” their covenant (Gen. 31:45-48) and Samuel and Saul erected stones in memory of victories (1 Sam. 7:12, 15:12). Monuments were also erected in memory of the dead (Gen. 35:20; 2 Kings 13:17). Heaps of stones mark the way and mark our memory. These monuments of stone are another way of thinking about ‘marked theology’ because they say something about what we believe about God and each other; monuments mark and make our beliefs. They impact our psycho-social-theological worlds, especially if we see them every day. They infiltrate the bone case of our memory, whether we like it or not.

Today’s passage is no different for Moses and the elders charge the children of Israel, that when they cross over the Jordan and enter the land promised to them by the Lord, to set up stones and cover them with plaster, build an altar of stones for God, make sacrifices, and write on the stones all the words of the law. In other words, Moses instructs them to build a monument, an altar of stones, for God.

Then harkening back to the heart of the law from earlier in Deuteronomy, the Shema, “Hear, O Israel. . .,” Moses and the priests instruct all of Israel—“Keep silence and hear, O Israel!” Don’t say anything when you enter the land, the land flowing with milk and honey. Don’t say anything, but do something. Set up stones. Build an altar. Offer sacrifices of worship to the Lord. Write down the law on the stones. All of this reveals an enactment of faith. It’s not enough to speak the faith or think the faith but enact the faith for it must be embodied, incarnated in their memory. The ‘ten words,’ the Decalogue, should be put into action. This covenant with God is not purely oral/aural but a visual and tactile reality. Do something. Moses encourages them to physically engage their beliefs, not solely with a voice but with their body and the physical creation of God. Faith is more than intellectual ascent; it is a descent or immersion into the physical world of God, thus the people of Israel are to utilize material stones. This is also why so much focus is on ‘the land’ in the book of Deuteronomy. Spirituality intersects with materiality.

The building of a monument of stones is made up of physical materials from the earth, from the land. Even the sacrifices and burnt offerings (are made up of animals from the earth). Faith in God is feeble and perhaps ephemeral when only spoken. But building an altar of stones and writing the law down are means to foster good memory because they are prone to forget the Lord who brought them out of the land of Egypt. This isn't the first time Moses encourages the people not to forget by using tangible means for remembering. Earlier, he instructs them to bind the words on their hands, fix them on their foreheads, write them on the doorposts of their houses and gates (Deut. 6). Recalling and reaffirming our faith in God requires the tangible, just as the communion table is an altar made up of bread and wine from the earth that we eat and drink. The enactment or embodiment of faith. The children of Israel needed a monument to remember the law of God, to worship God, to enact their belief system. What we build says something about who we honor and what we uphold.

Our corporate worship services are an enactment of our belief. We build a liturgy to remember and to worship God, ultimately. Words alone do not suffice but we need the entire drama of liturgy to affirm who we love and what we believe. Repetition of liturgical action reaffirms and reconfirms to whom we belong. This is why Moses, after giving his instructions on what to build, tells the people of Israel, "This very day you have become the people of the Lord your God." Crossing over into the promised land, but moreover, constructing an altar of stones to worship God, seal their belonging as the covenantal children of God. Through this enactment of faith, they reveal that they are God's people.

But as you know, there are things we may build that have nothing to do with God and faith. There are monuments that we have made into altars to other gods. *The Altars Where We Worship*, a book by Juan and Stacey Floyd-Thomas and Mark Toulouse, explore how traditional religious altars have been replaced in our human hearts with altars created by popular culture such as business, entertainment, sex, technology, and sports. People still search for meaning, still build altars, but they are monuments to other gods. There are altars we build and at which we bow that are separate from God and perhaps replace God. There are cultural liturgies we enact on a daily basis, even unknowingly.

I've said this before because I am no fool. Cameron Indoor Stadium is the #1 religious building on campus! Several years ago, during a timeout, there was an audio commercial at the basketball game which said "Cameron Indoor Stadium, a building with a soul." We erect monuments to replace God, though God declares, "... you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God..." (Deut. 5). Right here in chapter 27, we hear, "Cursed be anyone who makes an idol or casts an image..." Yet we continue to build buzzwords monuments to 'wellness,' monuments to 'resiliency' and 'purpose,' but they are erected even at universities without the acknowledgement of God, which means in the end, we may only be worshipping our ideas or ourselves. These monuments, in the end, are raised in our honor.

And it really doesn't matter what you say—"Keep silence, hear, O Israel"—because people watch what you do, what you build with your life, what monuments you construct with your habits and patterns of being in the world. We can say whatever we wish, but what you do and enact will affirm your words or deny them. There are erected monuments to consumerism and capitalism and death and exclusion and colonialism. These monuments may not be built by stones but are upheld by

systems and structures that hurt the disinherited, the alien, the orphan, the widow, or anyone with their back up against a wall. Some man-made monuments are mean and are liturgies of misery for many.

In other words, don't tell me about Jesus, O Christian, show me Jesus. Don't tell me about Christianity, show me Christ. Don't tell me about what the Bible says, show me the God to whom the Bible witnesses. Show me your monuments, the altars you have built, and you will show me what you believe, what you value, who you are, and what you worship. You will show me the architecture of your life. What kind of life are you building?

In a recent New York Times essay, "How to Make a Life from Scratch," President of the Mellon Foundation and writer and poet Elizabeth Alexander reflects on an Eritrean Orthodox Christian and American Orthodox Jewish wedding. At the wedding, the huppah is used, which is a canopy carried in a Jewish wedding. She notes, "It symbolizes shelter for the newlyweds. The sides of the huppah are always open, which lets in light and air but also people, so that the home of the newlyweds is shared and the pot of stone soup is shared, invoking the tent where Abraham welcomed visitors and angels. Let your house be wide open, and open on all sides to welcome wayfarers." She stresses that "we are impoverished if we remain strangers to one another..." and she raises a final question, "Will we build homes with open sides that welcome wayfarers into our lives?"

Alexander raises this question in honor of her deceased Eritrean husband, who died at the age of 50 and who built a life in the United States as a refugee. Does the monument, the Statue of Liberty, mean anything for how we shape our lives? It is true that we can erect monuments without any meaning when systems and structures never change; yet, the same is true if we take them down and make a cosmetic shift without any long lasting structural change.

It's clear the life Alexander desires to build in tribute to her deceased husband; she sings his song now, she writes. But what kind of life are *you* building? What kind of monument have you erected with your life? What has been constructed? What is honored and upheld? What or who is worshipped? What is engrained in the bone case of your memory for "each us has monuments in the bone case of memory"? What will others find there when we are gone? What monuments will be left by our lives? Even more so, for Moses' sake, let me ask, is your life an altar for God?

Are you building monuments for God? If so, what are you building? What we build and what we worship tells us to whom we belong because it reveals what we believe. For Moses, "This very day you have become the people of the Lord your God. Therefore obey the Lord your God, observing his commandments and his statutes that I am commanding you today." Our monuments indicate our belonging and obedience. In this case, for the people of Israel, they belong to God and are to obey God. Monuments reveal our allegiance. They speak for themselves, whether we like it or not, and they live in the bone case of our existence. When you come into your blessing, into your promised land, like the children of Israel, what do you do? Moses teaches to build an altar of worship to God and to write down the law. Moses urges remembrance in word and deed—remember God and God's words, even while enjoying blessings, the good gifts of the land and God's bounty of milk and honey.

When we gather for worship on Sundays in this space, we are reminded that we belong to God and no one else. These stones of Duke Chapel have been erected as a monument to God. The danger is that sometimes we make our monuments god rather than a means to the worship of God. We

worship the means and not the end. We worship the building and not the heavenly builder. We worship the music and not the cosmic Muse. We worship the preacher and not the eternal Word of God. We worship the monument but not the Maker of heaven and earth. We can idolize our rituals, our architecture, our ideas, our theologies, our politics of belief, our monuments of stone, but what Moses did to the two stone tablets of the covenant in chapter 9 because the people had turned from God and casted an image of a calf for themselves, can happen to your monuments— they can be destroyed, smashed, torn down, removed, overnight.

This can happen if you forget that you are the people of God. What if we gain the land, the dream job, the prized possession, the multimillion dollar grant, the spouse we always wanted, gain the whole world, and forget God and lose our soul? We would have built a life without the Source of Life, the *fons vitae*, and discover that we were worshiping ourselves all along.

Our physical monuments are a revelation of the monuments of our collective heart. What is built up in your heart? May it be the altar that priest and poet George Herbert writes about.

A broken ALTAR, Lord, thy servant rears,  
Made of a heart and cemented with tears;  
Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;  
No workman's tool hath touch'd the same.  
A HEART alone  
Is such a stone,  
As nothing but  
Thy pow'r doth cut.  
Wherefore each part  
Of my hard heart  
Meets in this frame  
To praise thy name.  
That if I chance to hold my peace,  
These stones to praise thee may not cease.  
Oh, let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine,  
And sanctify this ALTAR to be thine.