

Praise in God's House

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Psalm 48

"We ponder your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple."

Movement 1 – A Tribute to our Monuments

A way to remember significant moments in our lives.

We love to build monuments. We love to erect obelisks for our own gazing glory, for our own sense of awe and our own sense of accomplishment. We love to build statutes, large rocks cut and carved in a particular way to signify a particular thing. We love to build monuments. We love to gaze at them, to wonder about them, to learn about them and to experience them. Monuments are symbols of our past; they serve an almost religious purpose to our lives, connecting us with something that offers us meaning and purpose. For example, the plaque on the wall in the narthex paying tribute to Horatio Gates Jones is a monument to an individual who was very instrumental in starting this church, and a reminder of the beginning struggles of the church. The anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, describes religion in part as a series of symbols connecting to meaning. He goes on to offer more about religion, but even that much makes sense, especially when I think about the many monuments in our landscape, and the symbolic nature they carry. Think about the Frank Capri classic, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. There is one scene in the beginning of the movie when Mr. Smith travels around to the various monuments in Washington. He is a wide-eyed, naive newcomer to the beltway, he is someone who loves and lives the Constitution and the Deceleration of Independence, and Mr. Smith becomes taken up by the American dream. He went to the Jefferson Memorial to the Lincoln Memorial to the Washington Monument and was swept by the sweet waters of the American story that those great men represent. That is why the monuments are there, to point to the American dream of freedom and democracy and our story in achieving that Dream. They are symbols connecting to something greater than one person, and one day. They are pointing to a significant moment in history. We remember those moments; we want to honor those moments, so we have built monuments. We have built monuments to honor the soldiers, monuments to honor those who dedicated their lives to service, and monuments to remember moments of greatness.

The national monuments are just an example of a human response, which we all tend to practice to one degree or another. There is a tribe of Native Americans who plant a tree when a child is born, and in a sense that tree is a monument to the child. In our families maybe we have a room, an artifact, or a tradition to honor the memory or the practice of one of our parents, grandparents or great-grandparents. We do not build great statutes when a child wins a state championship, but we save the jersey. We do not build a sculpture when a child is born, but we save the hospital bracelet. We have our monuments to memory and accomplishments. From schools to cities to states to countries we have painted the landscape with points of honor for a memory, an act, or an individual. They are mirrors reflecting our dreams and our story. They inspire us, inform us, and guide us. We love to build, collect, and gaze upon our monuments.

Movement 2 – The Monument of the Church

Pride in ourselves

Our monuments are a testament to ourselves. In this case I would ask you to consider the church as a monument testifying to the progress of humanity. It is a scandalous thought and a dangerous suggestion at which many would take offence. But many churches are viewed as monuments to human capabilities. Many churches show off and brag about the workmanship of the building, the grandeur of the steeple, or the size of the dome. It is a typical response, one that we should not be surprised. Look at the psalm for today. If one were to quickly read the psalm for today, one could easily think that the city of Jerusalem, the physical features especially, was on the receiving end of all that praise spattered throughout the psalm. We have a picture of a city so magnificent that kings shook when they saw it. It was a city so magnificent that one only needs to walk around it and notice its defenses. It was a city so magnificent that it shined for all others to see. The city itself can be seen as a monument to the greatness and power of Israel. Jerusalem is a shrine, a place to honor and to brag about, and a place to prove how great the people are. If one were to read the psalm quickly one could easily come to such a conclusion. It would not be too much of a leap to imagine the city founders, fathers, architects, and engineers patting themselves on the back for the great job they had done when they built Jerusalem. Of course we will give credit to God as the right, pious, lip service that we are all supposed to do, but this great city is a testament to those who built and maintained it. It is a psalm that praises the city, or some may think.

We are not so far off with our own churches. For example, in St. Paul, Minnesota, there sits on a hill the Roman Catholic Basilica. It is a humongous building with an overwhelming dome almost dwarfing the rest of the building. It was built in the early 1900s and is considered an amazing piece of architecture, and it is. The thing I noticed about that building was the way some talked about it. They described it as John Ireland's Cathedral. John Ireland was the bishop at the time it was built, had a very large ego, and was always thinking along the size of the American landscape and looking for a way for the Catholics to become a part of the magnanimity. The church was known and bragged about because of its size and prominence. Or maybe you know those churches that describe themselves by starting with the facilities of the building. "How is your church?" "Great, we have a full size gym, gold-plated pews, marble floors, and an organ that will blow you away." The church building becomes the center of the church itself and we would also like to write a psalm praising the building as the new mini-Zion. I find it ironic that the great 20th century American theologian, Richard Niebuhr, suggested that pride was the greatest of human sins, and yet we like to have pride in our building; that pride threatens to take the center stage of any church. When I show people what we have done with Scott Hall, I swell with pride. I show people the beautiful windows we have and swell with pride. I show people the crypt in the basement, and swell with... a kind of historical curiosity. I know a church in Dayton that brags because it was the setting for Wilbur Wright's funeral. I know of a church in Providence, RI that brags because of its tower and historical significance. In fact, I would be hard pressed to find a church that does not find, concoct, or embellish something about itself to be proud. It may be the building, it may be the history, or it may be something else, but I think we would find it very easy to stand with Psalm 48 and say, "beautiful in elevation is my church. It is a sight that causes the world to tremble. Its walls are strong and its heritage is sure." I think we would all find it easy to see churches as a testament to our history, our hard work, and our success.

Movement 3 – The Exhaustion of Monumental Upkeep
We cling to our pride with a clenched and closed fist

Yet our monuments require work and attention. Someone needs to sweep the floor of the Lincoln Memorial. Someone needs to attend to repairs of Mount Rushmore. Someone needs to make sure the Liberty Bell stays clean. Our monuments require work and attention. We expect that our National monuments will require work, but have we thought about our churches? The edifice needs to be re-plastered. The gilding needs to be replaced, and the pews need new cushions. If we are going to have a great organ, then we need to keep it in good condition. If we are going to have a nice big room then it needs to be vacuumed. The monument needs attention. If Jerusalem is going to shine on the hill, if it is going to be a great city then we need a great army to protect that city because every king itching for a fight will want to try its might against the great city. This may not be a problem at first, but over time the resources may diminish, and the vision may wane. The danger becomes very real that the building becomes the focus of the life of the church, not serving the Lord. The danger becomes very real that the institution demands more attention than the spiritual response to Christ.

There was a story of a family that owned a large house in a rural part of the United States. The house was that family's pride and joy; it was a testament to the resilience of their ancestors. The family loved that house, took care of the house. Yet over time the family members moved away, the matriarch and patriarch passed away, and the house was left vacant. In this story the brother and sister ended up fighting over who should take care of the house as taxes increased, as value decreased and the house became a liability, and they forgot the story of the house. The monument to the family's past needed work, attention and upkeep – it became more than the final family members could bear.

Could not the same happen to churches? Do you know of churches that have diminished in size and resources so that the congregation could no longer maintain the monument to the past glory that was erected? Do you know of churches where the sanctuary has become a museum and the museum had become a mausoleum? This happened to Jerusalem when it was overtaken that burned by the Babylonians. There were few left to care for the Holy City and it fell into disrepair. The rooms became too big to vacuum, the numbers became too small to support, and the monument to an idea, to human progress, to success begins to crumble and fall. This is a danger we all face with our churches. Our buildings demand so much attention that as we try to patch and repair, we forget the reason why the building is there. The vision no longer excites us. The dream no longer invigorates us, and we become frustrated and fall into despair. The work needed by the monument is more than we can give.

Movement 4 – Standing in God's Dream
God relieves us from our pride – we don't have to do it alone

Our attention needs to be focused not on our monuments, but on God. Our monuments are finite, they are human, and they will crumble. No city can last forever. No city is that great. There is something greater than our own achievements. There is someone greater than you or I and that is God. Remember that I said a quick reading of Psalm 48 could lead one to understand it as a praise of a particular city? A fast, hasty reading could lead one to such a conclusion. Yet

walk with the scripture. Let the scripture become your own words, let the scripture become your own passion and your own dreams and realize to whom the scripture points. Not to a city of stone and mortar. Not to walls made by human hands, but to God, the holy one who is above all things. God, the one who creates all things and who glorifies all things. The Psalm is speaking about God. It is speaking about the place God creates. It is praising the actions not of humanity but of God. It is holding up the towers and the ramparts not made by human hands, but made by the divine hands. We are called and challenged to consider that this Psalm is not about the human achievement but about the holy achievement. That is what we are to praise and that is what we are to honor.

Such a revelation is freeing. Such a revelation gives us the freedom to let go of our mop as we realize that we no longer have to serve our human monuments. We do not have to honor a past individual, but instead are made free to honor God, and this psalm returns to us our vision of God's city; the city of Zion. Today the church is in a sense the city of Zion and we are to honor what God has done and is doing. We don't need to honor the size of our hall but the presence of God in that hall, and we are made free. It is like that moment in *The Truman Show* when Truman, played by Jim Carey, realizes that he can see the world, that his world was an illusion and there is much more beyond his world. It is that moment in the book *Pilgrim's Progress* when the Pilgrim looses his burden, and he can finally walk with a straight back. When we realize that the church is not about our accomplishments, or us when we realize that Mt. Zion is not about human deeds or accomplishments, and when we realize that we do not have to praise our actions we are made free. We are free from having to maintain a monument, and free to focus instead on God.

Movement 5 – The Steadfast Dream

God calls us to be in relationship with the divine

With our attention on God's work we can realize what God is doing. The Psalm calls us to this attention. The Psalm describes how, "we ponder your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple." We ponder not the hard work of our ancestors, we ponder not the value of the stones and motor, but instead we ponder the steadfast love of God. The steadfast love of God is a relational love; it is a convent love that God continually offers to us. When we ponder God's steadfast love, we are pondering the ways in which God has promised to take care of us, the ways in which God has not left us, and the ways in which God calls us to respond to that holy and divine love.

Even more than that, we think about the times when we did not receive God's love with open arms. We think about the times when we did not share God's love with open arms, and we realize that God loves us still. This is God's steadfast love, a love that will be true to us no matter what. It is in the city of God, it is in the holy Zion that such love can be fully experienced, fully received and fully known. It is the difference of the picture and the reality. A picture of the Sistine Chapel can give you some idea of its grandeur, but, as I am told, to go and actually see it is amazing, powerful and breathtaking. I can tell you about God's love, but to experience it with God's children in the holy city of Zion is an amazing and powerful thing.

Here in the church, we can scrub the floors, we can focus on the foundation, and we can mention the steadfast love of God in passing as we also mention our windows and doors. Or we can put down our brooms and our mops and we can focus on the steadfast love of God and be taken away into God's holy place. Then the church will become the heavenly Zion. Then the church will become the holy city. Not because of anything we do. Not because of anything we build, we create or we attempt, but because of what God does. This is the purpose of the church, to help you to focus on God, as a community. To give you the space to sit with your sister and your brother, to sing with your sister and your brother, to pray with you sister and your brother and to experience, to know, to believe in the love God has for you. And then the ground beneath you will become firmer than you would have ever imagined, then you will feel the comfort of God's holy city and then you will know that there is nothing you need fear because you are with God. As one commentator claimed, when you are in the presence of God, you will change, when you gaze upon the cross, you will change, and when you experience, focus and feel the wash of God's steadfast love, you will be changed. This is why we need to lift up our eyes from the monument we build to the working and actions of the Lord. For when we place our attention on God, we realize what God has been doing.

Movement 6 – The Monument of the Dream

The experience of the divine will be our focus

When we focus on God, the church becomes a new monument, a different monument and a holy monument. When we focus on God, the church becomes a place where we acknowledge God's presence, where we experience God's presence, and where we know that God is the source of all things good; God is the source of love. The church becomes the house of the Lord, but not in a material, static way. It is not a box that holds in God only allowing the lucky few in to experience the divine. No, instead the people of the church, the relationships within the church and the forgiveness and acceptance of the church become the place where God dwells and that cannot be measured by stones and mortar. It cannot be fortified by timber and steel. The house of the Lord is the joining of our hearts, and that can happen in a person's home, it can happen in the sanctuary, or in the fellowship. It is this holy community here before us. It is you and you sitting in the pews with a heart yearning for God. It is the people with a strong faith and the people with a new faith and the people with a questioning faith; you all make up the holy city of God. If you go in any church building when it is empty, then it is just a room. But come into the sanctuary when it is full and you will be walking into the house of the Lord.

Yet it goes further than that. We are not just connecting with individuals right here, but with those who have come before us and with those who will come after us. This is the way the holy city will shine. God's dwelling was, and is and will be and we are a part of that eternal glory. Walk around the church and notice not the foundation. Notice not the windows, but notice the names under the windows. Notice the names in the cemetery, and notice the names in the building. This building has been the meeting place for a vital and powerful Christian community. This building will continue to be the meeting place for an increasingly vital Christian community. This is the testament, the monument that is lifted up for all to see. Not the building, but the people.

That we are a people who gather around a great a glorious God who can create the heavens and the earth, who can cause the trees to shake and the stars to shine, and who has

offered a love divine for you and for me.

That we are a people who strive every day to love and accept each other just as God loves and accepts us.

That we are a people who hear and accept the challenge to clothe the naked, to feed the hungry, the shelter the homeless and to take care of the least of our society, because they are the most precious in the eyes of God.

That we are a people who desire, who yearn, and who work for justice to fall like rain, and for righteousness to flow like a mighty river in our church as God calls justice and righteousness to flow in the world.

That we are a people who have said yes, we will do justice, we will love righteousness and we will walk humbly with our God.

That we are a people who will always keep our hands open to invite someone to know and to experience the forgiveness and the grace of the Lord as we have received it through Jesus Christ.

That we are a people who are forgiven.

That we are a people who are redeemed.

God has fortified our city, our community on something stronger than rocks and that is why we can be that people. God has surrounded our city with something stronger than steel and that is why we can be that people. God has given us the wood of the cross, and with that I will fear no man! With the wood of the cross in my hand I will stand up to kings, I will stand up to princes; I will stand up to the powers and the principalities, because I dwell in the holy city of God.

Don't let the church become a monument to our own human achievements, but a monument to the achievement of Christ. Don't let the church become a museum to past human action, but witness to the current city with has been built by Christ. Walk with Christ, hand in hand, with each other, and you will offer praise in the city of the Lord.

AMEN