Daily Lenten Devotional
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If the Washington Monument is our greatest achievement of public art, then Grant's Tomb is easily the second. People may balk and speak of The Statue of Liberty or Mount Rushmore, yet Grant's Tomb finds its greatness not only in scale, but also evolution.

It is the largest mausoleum in the United States. And, for many decades Grant's Tomb was the most visited monument in New York City, perhaps the nation. Sitting high above the Hudson in the upper east side of Manhattan, the Tomb is both a window to the past and opportunity to see the grandeur of possibility.

Completed in 1890s, the façade and form of the mausoleum is a classical design, inspired by Hadrian's tomb. In the interior though the mausoleum is a near copy of Napoleon's tomb in Paris, Les Invalides.

Where the mausoleum becomes an open question is not in its design, but in its original lack of adornment or embellishment. It is as if the design of the tomb invites enhancement or further interpretation.

Where there were empty niches surrounding Grant's sarcophagi, now the niches are filled with the busts of generals put in place in 1935. Where there was an open space for an equestrian statue, there are now eagles salvaged from another building. Adjacent rooms above the tomb are now large murals depicting the battles of the Civil War even being added to as late as 1995.

In some ways it is the inverse of Washington's Monument. Washington's Monument has no adornment whatsoever. When it was completed there was not even an inscription to tell you this is for Washington. Grant's is the inverse in that all the areas that lacked adornment or allowed for the eye to be create meaning without guidance, all of the places that remained blank for Washington have been filled in. Generation after generation have added something to the tomb.

Yet its true greatness causing it to exceed others is its possibility for interpretation. It is malleable. The monument, although made of stone, seems to grow and adapt through the decades. The mausoleum changes again and again. And yet despites its adaptability the tomb always return to its it's single message: strength in union.

How Grant's Tomb achieves this complex vista is in the role it plays with memory, public memory, specifically the public need to remember and honor. Grant's Tomb not only achieved a monumental, pubic display of honor to a former president, it also was designed to be an open question, a persistent debt of memory. Grant's Tomb is an

attempt to satisfy the debt of honor which the people gave. The "union" won. The tomb is there to ask: Are we one people, a union?

The question is asked in the "fasces." 30 eagles adorn the outside of the mausoleum. Framing each eagle are two fasces. Fasces is a bundle of sticks bound together, usually with a blade in the center. The National Park Service suggests,

> The symbol is from Aesop's fable titled "The old man and his sons" which concludes, as did all of Aesop's fables, with a moral: "Strength in Unity." Singly the twigs are weak and easily broken, but when bound into a unity, they gain in strength and are unbreakable. Aesop, historians say, was born a slave and later was granted his freedom.

(As interesting aside, on the front of Lincoln's chair in his memorial there are fasces on either side of him.)

How the fasces form a question is when subsequent generations ask: why was there a Civil War? The answer given by the fasces in the 1890s is: for the union. We fought to preserve the union; the war to ensure we are "stronger as one."

As we will see in the other monuments depicting the "saving of the union" this positive claim suppresses a negative one. To say the Civil War was for the "union" and the victory was to unite the people, was as far as people were willing to go in the 1890s. Claims of union was a safe place for the Northern and the Southern states to reunite. Slavery not so much. Grant's Tomb like the statue of General Tecumsah Sherman only a few miles away in Manhattan celebrate the victory of the Union Soldier. Slavery? No. Emancipation? No. Freedom for all people? No.

In the current generations, the idea of speaking of the Civil War without the question of slavery is anathema. You must ask the question of union and the question of slavery together. As Lincoln suggested in his second inaugural address, the war was penance for both the North and the South.

Grant's Tomb could be easily criticized as embodying the convenient amnesia in America regarding slavery after 1872. There was an unspoken rule, "it is better to not speak of slavery as it is a thing of the past." This rule would prove painfully false.

The mausoleum is a celebration of a nation rebuilt, reunited. Fasces everywhere! Yet, as I walked the mausoleum I was struck by the sole focus. The honor seemed hollow without the honesty admitting the crime of slavery.

Yet, in the tension came this question: can you construct a monument to honor and evoke penance at the same time? Can one site accomplish both? If monuments and

memorials and museums are to satisfy a debt, can one piece of art or architecture satisfies multiple debts? Could one site seek to satisfy honor, loss, and misdeed?

Here the tomb becomes alive again. What would be our monument to union? Is Grant's Tomb a viable answer?