LENTEN DEVOTIONAL
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> *The United States of America originated as a slave society, holding millions of Africans and their descendants in bondage, and remained so until a civil war took the lives of a half million soldiers, some once slaves themselves.*
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> *The shift from slavery to freedom precipitated by the Civil War was the cataclysmic event and central dilemma of the century, one that continues to shape American society even today. That event reverberated throughout public space in countless ways, some obvious and others subtle. The war provoked the greatest era of monument building ever seen in this country.*
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> *The Civil War did not simply emancipate four million individuals whose lives and histories had been shaped by slavery. That act of emancipation shook the life of the nation and everyone in it.*[1]

Todd Savage's thesis for his work on monumental public art both before and after the Civil War is very focused. Slavery was defining and still is. "Originated" does not suggest an attribute, but a defining characteristic. Yet, what I found most helpful in his claims was the "shift from slavery to freedom" should be seen as the central dilemma of a century and not the Civil War itself.

This claim, that "emancipation shook the life of the nation and everyone in it," is the key to understanding not only the 19th century of American history, but also the 20th. And for our consideration emancipation is a debt we owe in memory, in honor, and in penance. Please don't half understand my claim. By what we owe to emancipation I am not referring to reparations or financial restitution. That is a topic about which I am neither prepared to or qualified to speak. What we owe emancipation in terms of memory does have a economic expression, but it is not best understood in terms of literal currency or assets.

What is most interesting for our consideration is the idea that there is a debt of memory, a debt of honor, and assuredly a debt of penance that has yet been satisfied.

Savage begins his work on monuments with the claims above, but he also makes an important allusion to Lincoln at Gettysburg.

How we are free, who is free, and at what cost was what Lincoln asked at the dedication of the Gettysburg cemetery in 1863. Calling upon those gathered to dedicate the battlefield as a memorial he charged the nation: *we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in*

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[1] Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. These selection are taken from the opening paragraphs of the book.

vain, that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom. Hence in a strange sense the rebirth of the nation begins not with the battle of Gettysburg, but with the dedication of the site, a dedication paid for in the loss of life.

I am not sure if any other battlefield has ever been memorialized while the larger war persisted. Certainly casualties of war have been buried where they fell, and the gruesome and overwhelming task of Gettysburg after the battle was just that. Tens of thousands were buried not far from where they died. (Many would later be exhumed, transported, and reentered in their home state.) The battle of Gettysburg was a matter of three days, the process of burial and reburial at the site would last for years.

This is important for two reasons. First, the site of the tragedy became the space of the memorial. And second the site was sacred according to Lincoln.

That the site and space of memory are commingled is important in so far as the debt is too a place. This site must be revered; this place must be remembered; the geography itself is now owed a debt. For Protestants who tend to shy away from any recognition of embodied holiness this might sound strange. A historical site is more to our way of thinking than is a sacred site. At Gettysburg though we have a powerful example of how the debt is not limited to a people, let alone a person. The debt can be to a cause, to a decision.

I believe that is what Lincoln was referencing in the notion of "dying in vain." In that place, in that time, in the midst of war, Lincoln was not declaring freedom as union, for that freedom was not new. The new birth of freedom is, arguably, emancipation.

The new birth of freedom, according to Kirk Savage and his research, is not the restoration of the union, the newness is the end of slavery and the emancipation. That the "war provoked the greatest era of monument building ever seen in this country" is true. Simply in terms of sheer number of statues and in the many, many communities where they would be erected. Yet, what is not clear is whether or not these statues were able to pay the debt of memory, of honor, of penance. Surely a monument like "Silent Sam" or the Sherman statue by Saint-Gaudens intended to satisfy a debt, yet without the component of emancipation were they ever able to achieve their intent?