

Lenten Devotional
Thursday, March 6, 2025
Written by Rev. Fred Garry

Just east of the Capital building in Washington D.C. are three large statues forming the Grant Memorial.

Often when I mention Grant's Memorial people have either never heard of it or they confuse it with Grant's Tomb (which is in Manhattan).

Grant's Memorial should be considered as part of a set, or a line of three monuments. At its center is the Washington Monument, the nation's first and perhaps greatest public art. Washington's Monument was completed in the 1870s after languishing for decades as it lacked funding, or it lacked a clear design. For almost fifty years Washington's Monument stood alone. And then, as a kind of "full measure of devotion" two large public works were completed creating the length of the Mall. Lincoln's Memorial to the west and Grant's to the east. It was as if the Revolution was flanked by the Civil War.

No one can visit the Mall in Washington D.C. and miss Lincoln's Memorial and Washington's Monument. Each is massive; each is by design clear and resolute. Washington's Monument is unadorned, without word or inscription. There is no stylized base, no colonnaded path. The obelisk simply rising to the sky as if to say, America is an unembellished possibility. Lincoln's Memorial is just as grand, but the opposite in style. There is the colossal statue of the seated Lincoln, the massive columns, the Greek temple turned sideways to suggest the people are invited to enter the divine without mystery or merit. And, most important, there are the words of Lincoln behind him. Both the obelisk and the temple can be seen from a distance; they are lit at night as a sign of eternal truth.

Grant's Memorial should be considered only after these because of the stark contrast. The Monument has three statues, and they are dwarfed by the capital behind them. Yet, like the Mall itself, the three statues form a line, and the sequence has meaning. In the middle of the line of three is Grant seated on a horse. It is as if he is looking down the Mall, looking toward Lincoln, but not at him. He seems to be pondering the field of battle. His gaze is lowered, his hat pulled down firmly on his brow, one hand rests on his saddle the other by his side. His horse seems ready but weary.

To Grant's left there is a wild statue of the artillery in chaos. Horses are flailing, men are fighting to move the canons. All is falling apart; all is insanity. To Grant's right the calvary embodies the same theme. Horse and rider are trampling others as if they were fighting each other. The three statues together paint a picture of war's violence and madness. Grant sits serene, but he is yet in the midst.

On its own, Grant's Memorial is witness to the carnage of the Civil War and any war for that matter. Grant's image is so different from that of Andrew Jackson just outside the White House. Jackson is engaged and in the fight; he stares wildly ahead as if he is the frenzy of the battle. I remember the feeling of sadness as I gazed at Grant. It was as if he were there to offer a terrible service, fulfill a painful duty. No fanfare. No gallantry. The general sat rock still as if the Fates were terrible goddesses.

When seen as part of the length of the Mall, when seen as leading to Washington and forming the balance of Lincoln, his Memorial begs you to remember we are people who have great aspirations but often bring great suffering on each other. Although Grant was a president, he is not depicted as such. Lincoln is the president; Grant the general. Again, as they both look to Washington it is as if his dual role is reflected: General Washington became President Washington, both with great consequence.

In the decades to follow, many more great public monuments and memorials would find their place in the Mall. Yet, the heart of the public space is these three. It is as if they have stretched the canvas so we may tell our story, remember our past, imagine our future. As such they form a measure for interpretation. In them is honor, tragedy, and penance. In the coming days I will reflect on Washington's Monument and Lincoln's memorial directly. But today, let us linger for just a moment on the penance of Grant's Memorial.

The penance, the debt seeking satisfaction in being forgiving and in forgiving, I believe is captured in the sobriety of Grant contrasted by the chaos of the artillery and the calvary. There is darkness in the error of things falling apart and there is darkness in the calculations of destruction. The instruments of war are out of control; the calm of Grant belies any excuse that death was an accident. Grant's Memorial seems to suggest this is the price for the sin of slavery. To borrow Lincoln's appraisal,

"Woe unto the world because of offenses for it must needs be that offenses come but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which in the providence of God must needs come but which having continued through His appointed time He now wills to remove and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came.

Washington's Monument is a clear image of honor. It is as if glory is rising unadorned. Lincoln's Memorial embodies the weight of tragedy, the depth of loss. His posture is one of complete exhaustion. Yet, in Grant we see the powerful image of debt, the "woe due". Without Grant's Memorial it is as if we are victims or heroes and not the deeply flawed, the heart torn, the broken soul. Penance must be remembered too.

Closing Prayer: God of mercy hear our prayer. Let us remember those who sacrifice, honor those who lead with courage, but may we also ever bear in mind the debt of sin, the "woe due". May we remember so our future is not ruined by oblivion. Amen.