**Glimpses of Glory**

**Acts 1:1-11**

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Stan Purdum, in Homiletics magazine, tells of the time when he took his family on a vacation out east. They were going to pass close to the place where he grew up in Saratoga Springs, New York. He moved from there to another state when he was in high school, and now, filled with nostalgia since they would be driving fairly close by, he wanted to take his family to see the area of his youth.

Close to Saratoga Springs is a memorial called the Saratoga Monument. It celebrates the decisive win by the Americans over the British in the 1777 Battle of Saratoga during the American Revolutionary War. He describes the monument as a majestic, imposing stone obelisk nearly 155 feet tall. It was built 100 years after the battle and there's a staircase inside that allows visitors to climb some 190 steps to the top from which they can see grand views of the surrounding area.

During his teen years, Stan and his friends used to ride their bicycles to the monument. He remembers climbing the staircase on more than one occasion. He was excited to show his family this great stone monument.

Purdum describes that it was a hot day when they arrived. They were bumping along in an old motor home in which the air conditioning had quit. Everyone was sweaty and tired from long hours of travel. The kids were seated in the vehicle at a table playing cards. When their dad urged them to get out to see the obelisk, they merely glanced out the window, said something about it being just another monument, and went back to playing cards. Purdum's wife told him to go ahead and have a look; she'd wait in the vehicle with the kids. She was more interested in where they were going to camp that night and whether it would have a pool where the kids could swim.

Somewhat deflated, Purdum says that he walked alone to the massive structure, consoling himself with the knowledge that at least he'd be able to climb the staircase and see the surrounding countryside again. But that didn't happen. When he got to the door, he found it locked. The park had closed for the day a few minutes before they'd arrived.

While driving away, Purdum thought about how no one in his family had looked at the monument for what it was intended to memorialize*.*

* To his kids, it was just another pile of stones like others they'd seen.
* To his wife, it was an interruption in getting the family settled for the night.
* And to Purdum himself, the monument stood not for the brave soldiers who died in 1777, but as a touchstone of happy times he had there as a kid.

If those who built the monument could have asked Purdum and his family members what the monument meant to them, they'd have likely been disappointed in the answers.

We are a species that likes to create monuments.

You might recall from Genesis 28, after Jacob “stole” the birthright of his twin brother Esau, that Jacob was commanded by his father Isaac to go to his mother’s father and find a wife from his clan. On his way he stopped for the night to sleep, and you will remember that he dreamt of a ladder that reached to heaven and angels were ascending and descending. And God spoke from above the ladder and promised Jacob the same promise that his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham received. That the land on which he slept will be for him and his descendants.

When Jacob woke up he said “Whoa! This is an awesome place. Surely this must be the house of God and the gate of heaven.” So he took the stone that he used as a pillow, poured oil over it, set it up as a pillar to be a monument and a witness where he made covenant with God.

When Joshua entered the Promised Land with the Israelites, he commanded the men carrying the Ark of the Covenant to stand in the river Jordan with the Ark. When they walked into the river, it immediately quit flowing and all the Israelites were able to pass across on dry ground. Joshua then commanded that one person from each of the twelve tribes pick a stone from the river, and they piled them up as a monument and a witness. Joshua says, “When your children ask their fathers in time to come, ‘What do these stones mean?’ Then you shall let your children know Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.” (Joshua 4:21-22).

The problem with the land that God promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob for their descendants to occupy and thrive in, this land that now Joshua was entering with the Israelites, the problem is that there were people already living there. And so we find that Israel is often warring with other peoples.

Samuel found himself in such a situation with the Philistines. I Samuel 4 tells how the Philistines routed the Israelites and took the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark proved to be a bit of a menace to the Philistines, so they sought to return it. Now the Philistine army was large and powerful, and the Israelites feared them. But something miraculous happened. The Philistine army got all discombobulated and confused in Chapter 7 and the Israelites easily ran them off never to return at least while Samuel was around.

So what did Samuel do? Set up a monument. Now this one is important because if you’ve ever sung the second verse of *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*, wondering what the heck you were singing about when you sang *“Here I raise mine Ebenezer; hither by thy help I’m come..,”* this explains it. Samuel took a stone, set it up as a monument in that place and called it “Ebenezer,” that is, “Stone of help,” because this is the place God helped us (1 Sam. 7:12).

We are a species that likes to erect monuments. We do so, because we like to remember things. That is what this weekend is all about for us in the United States. Memorial Day is about remembering.

It is interesting. Even though Joshua set up the cairn of rocks to help the generations that follow to remember what God did for the Israelites at the Jordon, there is nothing in scripture that has those generations asking, “What do those stones mean?” which is the whole reason Joshua wanted them piled. And there is a good chance those stones didn’t stay piled up for long.

We make monuments these days that last a lot longer. But how often, and how soon do monuments become detached from the events that led to their creation. In fact, consider Memorial Day itself; it's a day to remember fallen soldiers who died serving their country. Yet for many of us, it's simply a day off work, a holiday, the start of summer, a weekend when all appliances and furniture go on sale.

Memorial Day is a federal holiday for remembering the people who died while serving in the country's armed forces. The holiday, which is observed every year on the last Monday of May, originated as Decoration Day in 1886. It started after the American Civil War, when the Grand Army of the Republic, an organization of Union veterans founded in Decatur, Illinois, established it as a time for the nation to decorate the graves of the Union war dead with flowers. The southern states had actually been doing the same a couple of years earlier for the Confederate soldiers who died in the Civil War. By the 20th century, competing Union and Confederate holiday traditions, celebrated on different days, had merged, and Memorial Day eventually extended to honor all Americans who died while in the military service.

Here’s an interesting footnote: Michigan made "Decoration Day" an official state holiday in 1871. I think it was the first state to do so. By 1890, every northern state had followed suit.

Memorial Day, I think, is an important holiday, if we remember why we commemorate it. Memorial Day should be a time to remember how egregious war is because it requires the blood of our young men and women. And what is just as sad is it requires the blood of the young men and women of those on the other side, which is why the Civil War, from which this holiday derives, was so tragic. The enemy was us. Family was killing family to the tune of 600,000 lives lost.

Memorial Day is not a time to strut nationalism, nor is it a time to glorify war. It’s just the opposite. It is a time to count the cost. To honor with gratitude and unending respect those who paid the biggest price and died in service to this nation.

Have any of you had relatives that have died while serving in war? It is humbling. It might even fill us with guilt, and probably should. I know it did my father, who had friends and acquaintances who went off to war not to return, and he was unable to serve for medical reasons. We who are alive who get to eat the fruit that our dead soldiers cultivated, should commemorate Memorial Day with a certain solemness and sacredness. It is not a day to sing “Glory, glory hallelujah,” although we are going to. The Battle Hymn of the Republic is such a powerful, singable song, it’s hard not to sing it.

There are many who refuse to sing it because it is used to glorify war and it’s lousy theology. It reads as though God were on the side of the Union troops brandishing God’s will in the destruction of the Confederate Army. It certainly was the theology of the Israelites as they stormed into the Promised Land. However, I do not believe that it is in good keeping with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Glory does not come with war. Glory comes with living out the will of God. War is not the will of God; it is the construct of human sin. Glory comes with living the will of God. So there is one little word in the fourth verse that I often change when I sing it.

Instead of singing “As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,” I like to sing, “as he died to make men holy, let us live to make men free.” Isn’t that what Jesus asks of us?

Last Thursday was the fortieth day after Jesus resurrection. That is significant because it is when we celebrate the ascension of Jesus. According to Scripture, Jesus hung around for forty days after his resurrection to help the disciples prepare for what is next. On the fortieth day, he was taken up to God. That is what our lesson in Acts is about today. At the end of it, the disciples were just standing their gazing upward at the sky, perhaps with mouths agape. Finally, what we assume to be two angels show up and ask, “Why y’all just hanging around here gazing up at the sky? He told you what what’s going on.” The inference is to get moving! Jesus died to make you free. Now go live that good news with and for others. That’s where you will fine glory.

This weekend we remember those who died in war. We are a species who likes to build monuments. The eternal monument that we can build for them to honor, respect, and bring meaning to their sacrifice, is to live our lives with the grace of Jesus Christ. I pray that will be so for your life and for mine.

Amen.