

Why no Christian Art? Goldsworthy, Ritual, and the Meaning of Monuments

It is a shocking fact, one most don't realize, that from the time of Christ to the mid-third century, there is no Christian art or architecture bigger than a signature seal. And yet, Israel is full of monuments to events from this period—markers added long after, as if the events needed proof. Last March in Israel, our guide described Israel's geography as a third testament. Walking the plains of Galilee where Jesus delivered sermons is moving, but the exact location for most New Testament events remains uncertain. The Church of the Beatitudes commemorates Christ's Sermon on the Plain, but it could have taken place at any "level place" (or multiple places).

The same is true of the grotto beneath the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, which tradition identifies as Christ's birthplace, but the site was recognized by St. Helena, Constantine's mother, during her pilgrimage in 325-26 CE, nearly three centuries after Jesus' birth. She gathered location traditions and made her best identification possible. Sometimes multiple sites claim the same story, but this doesn't mean the event didn't happen; it reminds us that God is not bound to geography.

Peter expressed our human impulse to preserve holy moments at the Transfiguration. He exclaimed: "Let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" (Matthew 17:4). He wanted to mark the place where heaven had touched earth, like Helena centuries later. It's the ancient equivalent of "Pics or it didn't happen." Except it did happen. It does happen. Stephen challenged the same impulse while on trial before the Sanhedrin: "The Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands" (Acts 7:48). Even the tabernacle God commanded Israel to build was designed to move with the people. Scripture holds both the impulse to mark holy ground and a reminder that God cannot be confined to it.

Only once in Scripture does God command a monument. After Israel crossed the Jordan River, He instructed one man from each tribe to carry a stone from the riverbed and build a memorial (Joshua 4). The stones were not for God; they were for Israel. God knows how quickly people forget. Left to ourselves, we begin to tell the story differently. God's deliverance becomes our accomplishment. His faithfulness becomes our ingenuity. And His gift becomes a reward for our own merit. Like Israel's memorial stones, Andy



Andy Goldsworthy, Balanced River Stones, Brough, Cumbria, 24 September 1982. Andy Goldsworthy Digital Catalogue.

Goldsworthy works only with materials already present in the landscape—flowers, icicles, snow, thorns, stones. He avoids cutting into or breaking "living rock," but instead uses pebbles or debris that are "loose and unsettled, as if on a journey." His artwork is small in scale, temporary, and made only with his hands, teeth, and found tools.

Like Israel's memorial stones, Goldsworthy's work flows with creation rather than attempts to possess it or contain it. But unlike Goldsworthy's art, which is remembered by photograph, God's monument is an act meant for remembrance, and acts can be repeated. In this way, the weekly celebration of the Eucharist is a monument. Washing feet on Maundy Thursday is a monument. As Paul reminds us, "we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is

unseen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18).

So, is visual art important? Yes. Visual art and monuments matter because they help us remember, teach, and learn. They do not prove that God acted, nor do they contain His presence. Ritual performed in community endures because it is renewed each time and each time reveals God's glory.