

ALL GOD'S CHILDREN NEED TRAVELING SHOES

Where We've Been

Deuteronomy 8:2-4, 11-17

May 4, 2025

I am a keeper of calendars. I am a numberer of days. A marker of moments. I like my lists, and I love a good countdown. I'm currently tracking three on the Notes app on my phone. Would you like to hear them? Of course you would.

First, I am on day 989 pursuing the goal of getting at least 15,000 Fitbit steps every day. That's eleven to go before I hit 1000.

The second is more tender. The countdown tells me that there are fourteen school days remaining before summer break begins. Tender, because our older son is finishing fifth grade and will be leaving the elementary school that has been such a home for him. (*That's all I can say about that*).

The third countdown sits at eighteen days. It ends with fireworks on May 22: the first day of my sabbatical, the beginning of a ten-week period when I will disconnect from the routines and rhythms of ministry to rest, reflect, and renew.

These countdowns are all about looking forward, asking *what's next*? They fit the narrative of our faith. God's people have always been in motion, always been on the move. We are, after all, a pilgrim people, a people marked by journey. As you prepare for summer travels and I count down to sabbatical, our new sermon series tracks the movements and migrations of the faithful: All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes.

This morning, as we welcome new members, and as we honor those who have been part of this community for fifty or sixty years, we pause to hear a persistent command for faithful people, a command that runs like a ribbon through scripture from Genesis to Revelation. That command is this:

Remember. Remember. Do not forget.

As you move forward, do not lose sight of where you have been. Scripture would tell us that amnesia, forgetfulness, is a constant threat on the journey of faith. That faithful forward motion must begin with memory.

I confess that somehow—without my permission—I have reached the age at which historical documentaries constitute thrilling entertainment. Yikes. I love them. This winter, I watched all twelve hours of Ken Burns' nine-part series on the Civil War. Twice. No kidding.

I found the documentary alternately disturbing, inspiring, and instructive. Occasionally, as I watched, a thought would strike me: *Second Presbyterian Church existed then*. There were faithful people gathering every Sunday to hear the word of God, to sing hymns, to offer prayers, and to wrestle together with what it meant to live faithfully in a nation being torn apart. There were preachers crafting messages meant for that moment.

I find it a humbling and comforting realization. The memory of the Church—of *our* church—is long. And the journey of the faithful has never been easy.

This morning's text. The people of God are standing on the edge of the Promised Land. Moses, their leader, addresses them. It is not a short speech. The words of Moses stretch over thirty-four chapters. My Old Testament professor liked to say that it's a little like the speech that a parent gives before dropping their first kid off at college. And he was quick to add: like most of those speeches, the people weren't really listening anyway.

Thirty-four chapters. We call it the Book of Deuteronomy. In Chapter Eight, looking over into the Promised Land, Moses offers this instruction:

Remember where you have been.
Remember who you are.
Remember the Lord your God.

The particulars of Moses' counsel come in two parts.

First – remember God's provision. Resist the myth of self-sufficiency. Or in his words, "Do not say to yourself, 'my might, my own hands, my power have gotten me all this.' No, remember the Lord your God. The one who fed you in the wilderness, with bread that rained down from heaven and water that came from rocks."

My paraphrase: the world does not begin and end with you. You are utterly dependent on others. Those who have gone before you. Those who now surround you. And you are entirely dependent on God.

We worship to resist the myth of self-sufficiency. We serve because we rely on each other. We give, we participate in the life of a faith community, because we know we can't go it alone, and we didn't get here by ourselves. We were created for community, and it takes all of us to fulfill our God-given purpose. The truth of abundance is that God provides. God gives enough—more than enough for *all* God's creatures to live and flourish—and God calls us to share that abundance with joy and generosity.

But when we forget the source—when we imagine we are self-made and self-sufficient—we inflate our egos, and we ignore our limits. We find ourselves taking more than we need, building larger barns. We justify our selfishness and even celebrate those whose immense affluence serves no purpose but pride. And our forgetting begets fear. Fear of scarcity. Fear of loss. Fear of others who become not our neighbors but our competitors.

When we remember the source of abundance, we move from fear to faithful stewardship. From selfish stockpiling to generous sharing. Not hoarding for ourselves, but investing in abundant life for all God's children.
Remember God's provision.

This first counsel leads naturally to a second. **Remember that abundance, when misinterpreted, will be misused.**

Scripture would tell us that human insecurity and insatiability have tragic consequences. We must not forget the sins of the past, even when those stories bring pain. Because when we fail to remember, we risk repeating.

And here I want to be very clear: I am deeply concerned by voices both in the public square and in the Christian church that seem to have forgotten the history of our complicity with injustice and our capacity for evil. This amnesia leads to pride, and pride twists faith into a tool for domination, abuse, and exclusion.

Of course, this is not a new danger. Nor is it ancient history.

Recently I've been led back to Timothy Egan's book *Fever in the Heartland*, a chilling account of the Ku Klux Klan's resurgence in the early 20th Century. That resurgence, centered in Indiana, was fueled in part by the public support of prominent Christian leaders. For example, in January of 1923, the Reverend Aubrey H. Moore of First Christian Church in Noblesville preached a sermon titled: "Is the Ku Klux Klan a Menace to America?" Newspapers reported that Sunday morning gathering as the largest in a house of worship in many years, and those same papers recounted the text of his sermon. As Moore defended, and then praised, the Klan, he asked God to "bless every Ku Kluxer who may be under the sound of my voice." He concluded the sermon with this statement: "I would rather wear a white sheet in the dark than see my country in a shroud."

His congregation rose in affirmation. A sobering memory, and a stark warning.

When fear becomes our gospel, and power our aim, we are capable of great betrayal and sin. The words of Ephesians this morning call us to the heart of what it means to be people of the cross. That in his own body, Christ has broken down the dividing walls of hostility between us. If we seek to follow where Christ leads, we must live that unity. We, too, can lose our way, and that's why remembering matters. Not for crippling shame, but missional clarity. We remember to learn. To repent. To choose a more hopeful path.

Memory carries more than a warning. It holds profound hope.

Several years ago, my favorite author, Marilynne Robinson, was asked about churches like ours, and her response struck me as both a provocation and a promise. Here's what she said. She recalls how mainline churches were "very much in the vanguard of the anti-slavery movement. They truly were radical in the terms of their time...And I think they are radical institutions in their deepest impulses..."

She spoke of "prevenient courage" That's the kind of courage cultivated *before* it is required. A readiness to answer when the call comes.

Listen. That courage is in our bones, right here at Second Church, where, in the years before the Civil War, our founding pastor Henry Ward Beecher passionately preached in the pulpit and in the public square against the evil of slavery and guided this new church toward courageous faith. Their legacy is our responsibility.

What if we remembered where we've been as we consider our call and prepare for the path ahead?

Yes, the God who provided manna in the wilderness sustains us still. Yes, the truth of our brokenness calls us to humility still. And the courage planted by God still beats in our hearts.

And so, we remember, that we might respond. Let the courage forged by where you've been shape your decisions in *this* time. In a moment of political idolatry and dehumanizing meanness, move toward mercy.

I feel a need to be forthright. We are living in a time when much will be asked of the faithful. Perhaps more than you had imagined. When those days come—and they will come—it is good to remember. To remember the cries of the suffering, whose voices were heard by God, the God who led the chosen people out of bondage. To remember the commitment of those who came before us, who sat where we now sit. To remember the God who will never leave or forsake us.

To remember and respond. And so, with hope and faith and courage, we welcome new travelers. We honor long witness. We listen for silenced voices. We carry grace into a weary world.

And so, I'm going to keep counting. And you should too. Count the steps that carry you forward. Count the days that have shaped you. Number the saints who have formed faith in you. And then count on the God who leads and walks with you now.

Friends, stand firm.

Have courage.

Hold fast to what is good.

Remember where you've been.

Remember who you are.

Amen.