

“Short of the Finish Line”
Deuteronomy 34:1-8, 10
All Saints’ Sunday

November 2, 2025
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

I almost did something this week that I’ve never done before.

Those of you with a sharp eye may have noticed that the first scripture reading, the one that Sam/Ben just read, is not the same as the one that was listed in your Harbinger that was mailed to you this week.

I switched the first reading on Tuesday afternoon, after the Harbingers were in the mail.

Now, that’s not actually a first.
I’ve done that before...not often, but I’ve done it.
What I almost did that I’ve never done...is switch it AGAIN!

On Friday, as I was working on my sermon, I almost called Sam/Ben and said, “Hey, mea culpa, but I’m sending you yet another reading.”

But then...I decided that was a bad idea.
Changing a text for Sunday multiple times before Sunday.
When someone else is going to read it...it’s just confusing.
So I decided to forget that idea.

But I didn’t really forget that idea.
I just mentioned it at the start of my sermon.

Can we ever truly DECIDE to forget something?
Or does forgetting only happen unconsciously, when we least expect that it will happen?

David Isay is the founder of NPR's StoryCorps, which has become a national treasure trove of every day people's memories about life and work and love and family.

Isay recounts the time that he interviewed his father for StoryCorps. Isay says that it was important to him to do the interview, but afterward...he didn't consider the interview to be very memorable.

In fact, the only part of the interview that stood out for Isay was the one part that surprised him. In the interview, Isay asked his father what his dad was most proud of in his life.

This is a very common question.

And if that person is a parent, they almost INVARIABLY say that they are most proud of their children.

But Isay remembered how, during his father's interview, his father replied, "My books." In other words, out of 10,000 or 20,000 interviews, everyone ELSE says they are most proud of their children.

David Isay interviews his Dad?

He says he's most proud of the books he's written.

And Isay teased him mercilessly about this.

Dad—how could you say you were most proud of your books?!!

Then, very suddenly, Isay's father got sick.

He was healthy, he was working, and 10 days later he was dead.

On the night that his father died, David Isay went back and listened to the StoryCorps interview that he had conducted with his father. It was the first time he had listened to that interview since he had done it with his dad.

Why do our memories work the way they do?

I ask the question because of our text.

Our text puts it like this:

And God says to Moses:

“Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died...in the land of Moab...”

¹ As told to Krista Tippett in her interview with David Isay, in the podcast “On Being,” April 17, 2014, found at <http://www.onbeing.org/program/dave-isay-the-everyday-art-of-listening/transcript/6274>.

Wait a minute.

You shall not cross over?

This was the problem for the biblical writers, when it came to remembering Moses. Because if there was anyone who should have crossed over to the Promised Land, it was Moses.

After 40 years of leading the Israelites in the wilderness, after 40 years of dealing with their complaining in the wilderness...surely, if anyone deserved to see the fruit of his labor, it was Moses!

Why didn't God let Moses cross the finish line?

What's clear is that this question was most definitely on the minds of those who wrote about the Exodus all those years ago. That's why I chose our first text. In that passage from Numbers, part of it went like this:

“But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring [them] into the land that I have given them.’”

What's this “lack of trust” that Numbers is talking about?

Well, in the preceding verse, it says that God told Moses to tell the rock to put forth water. And in the verses you heard, Moses took his staff and hit the rock, instead of talking to the rock.

That's the reason that Moses doesn't make it into the Promised Land?

I'm not buying it.

It sounds more like a biblical author searching for a reason than the will and way of God.

And it's not just the author of Numbers who struggled with why Moses died at the time that he did. The Deuteronomist, who wrote Deuteronomy, offers a slightly DIFFERENT take.

In chapter 3, Moses says to God:

“Let me cross over to see the good land beyond the Jordan...”

And then Moses says to the Israelites:

“But the Lord was angry with me on your account and would not heed me.”

Did you catch the difference?

The Deuteronomist didn't want to blame Moses.

So he said that it was because of the Israelites' sin that God punished Moses.

Does that make sense to you?

Me neither.

As the footnote in my Bible puts it:

“No satisfying explanation has ever been given” in scripture, as to why Moses did not enter the Promised Land.

Now—the death of Moses and how we remember Moses—that may not be an issue keeping you awake at night these days. But I suspect for some of you, the issue of how we remember someone, someone important to us, is very relevant, especially on All Saints' Sunday.

The theologian Miroslav Volf once put it like this.

It's not just important for the faithful to remember.

It's also important for us to **remember rightly**.

So what does it mean to remember rightly?

Let me offer three suggestions.
I'll get at the first in an indirect way.

Does anyone here remember the radio program from years ago, called *Command Performance*?

Command Performance was a variety show that began 3 months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. It went out to the troops who were fighting in WWII. It continued throughout the war.

The columnist David Brooks recalls a day, years ago, when he was on his way home from work and listening to an old episode of this show.

It happened to be the one that aired on August 15, 1945...the day after Japan announced its surrender. The host, Bing Crosby, opened the show with these words:

“What can you say at a time like this? I guess all anyone can do is thank God it’s over....our deep-down feeling is one of humility.”

Then the actor Burgess Meredith read a passage written by the war correspondent, Ernie Pyle:

“We won this war because our [soldiers] are brave and because of many other things—because of Russia, England, and China and the passage of time and the gift of nature’s materials. We did not win it because destiny created us better than all other people. I hope in victory we are more grateful than proud.”

Brooks says that he got home, thinking about the subdued tone of those remarks...and he turned on the tv to watch a football game. In the first play he watched, the quarterback threw a pass to a wide receiver, who was immediately tackled for a two-yard gain.

The defender who made the tackle immediately got up and what do you think he did?

A chest-thumping victory dance.

“It occurred to me,” Brooks writes, “that I had just watched more self-celebration after a [two-yard tackle] than I had heard after the [Allies] won World War II.”²

Maybe a bit of hyperbole there, but the point is spot on.

The first thing it means to remember rightly...is **humility**.

To remember rightly is to be reminded that we are not our own.
And we did not get here on our own.
We belong to one another, and we belong to God.

And the story that God is writing with our lives is not about us.
It’s about God.
It’s about the love of God at work in each of you.

Which leads me to word #2 for remembering rightly:

Holy.

In our Reformed Tradition, “saint” does not refer to those people who have extraordinary gifts for holiness...to be a saint is to someone who has made mistakes, who has failed, who cannot count all their sins...and at the same time, is baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Which means everyone in this room is a saint.

² David Brooks, “The Road to Character,” New York: Random House, 2015.

Do y'all remember the former professional wrestler, Jesse Ventura? I know that may not be the first name that comes to your mind when I say "holy," but do you remember him?

Back when Ventura was governor of Minnesota, he made a remark that "religion is a crutch." When Billy Graham was asked about Ventura's remark, Graham replied:

"Maybe...but who doesn't limp?"³

As one biblical scholar puts it, "Seeing each other as saints is not...about our virtues..."⁴

Or even our eyesight.

It's about the grace of the risen Christ, at work in us.
That's what makes someone holy.
That's what makes each us a saint.

Let me get at it like this.

In my office, there's a picture of the youth group that I led when I was a fresh out of seminary, associate pastor in Dallas. A much smaller group than what we have here, but it was active and full of wonderful teenagers, teens who taught me an awful lot about what it means to be a pastor.

Those teenagers in that picture are now, of course, no longer teenagers. They are grown up, in their late 30s or early 40s, and many have families of their own. So earlier this fall, I was devastated to learn

³ Thomas G. Long, "Accompany Them with Singing—The Christian Funeral," Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

⁴ Ibid.

that one of the teenagers in that picture had died of cancer back at the beginning of September.

Now, when a mother of two young boys dies before her 40th birthday, needless to say, that's not the right finish line! And after I heard the news, I wasn't just sad...I was stumbling, more than a bit mad at God...God, how could you let this happen!!??

But then something else happened.
I came to church, the Sunday after I received the news.
I came to worship.

And I looked out at each of you, as you were singing the first hymn. And my faith in God, my hope in God—it was strengthened that day...when I saw you.

You, who have faced your own difficult losses in life...
You, who keep putting one foot in front of the other in faith...

You didn't know it at the time, but God was at work in you.
Because I when I looked out at you, I didn't just see your faces.

I saw the faith that you have carried through the years.
And I saw Christ, who has carried you.

Which leads me to word #3:
What does it mean to remember rightly?

- a) To approach our own lives, where we are, with **humility**.
- b) To see the **holy** in others, the ways Christ is at work in others.
- c) **Hope**.

Nicholas Wolterstorff is a retired professor of theology who taught at Yale and the University of Virginia. He wrote a book, years ago, about what it was like in the days following the death of his 25-year-old son, Eric.

Eric died in a mountain climbing accident.

And as Wolterstorff puts it:

“The world looks different now.

The pinks have become purple, the yellows brown.

Mountains now wear crosses on their slopes...

“My life is divided into before and after.”

The temptation to get stuck in the past, to be overwhelmed by his memories...it became very real.

“What do I do now with my regrets,” he ponders, “over the times I placed work ahead of...him...over the times I unreasonably got angry with him...”

And then Wolterstorff goes on:

“I believe that God forgives me...”

“I shall allow the memories to prod me into doing better with those still living. And I shall allow them to sharpen the vision and intensify the hope for that Great Day coming when [Eric and I] can...throw ourselves into each other’s arms...

The God of love will surely grant us such a day.”⁵

⁵ Nicolas Wolterstorff, “Lament for a Son,” Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987.

You know that scripture I was almost going to have Sam/Ben read this morning?

It's a description of that Day.

It's from Revelation, it goes like this:

"See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

"Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

Is it possible to remember a day...that hasn't happened yet?
You can...when it's a promise of God!

That Day when nothing will stop the saints of your life from throwing their arms around you...

The God of love will surely grant you such a Day.

Amen.