

## **“Going up the Mountain”**

Exodus 19:16-20 Matthew 5:1; 14:22-23; 17:1-2

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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Let me begin with a disclaimer: National Youth Conference is not held on a mountaintop. NYC is the mountaintop. When I went to NYC as a youth in 1978 it was held at the YMCA of the Rockies in Estes Park, Colorado. (Has anyone been there?) It is heaven on earth. The YMCA complex sits in a bowl surrounded by the Rocky Mountain National Park. Every where you look you see mountains, including Long's Peak, one of the tallest in the state. It was the perfect setting for the youth conference. NYC was held at that location in 1982 when I was the Coordinator and again in 1986 when I was on the Steering Committee.

We outgrew that facility and moved to Colorado State University for the 1990 conference. When the staff arrived for NYC that year we were all a bit depressed. Ft. Collins is not in the mountains. You can see the foothills in the distance but it is not a slice of heaven. We all grumbled, “This isn't NYC. How can we have the conference here? Where are the mountains? How can we have a mountaintop experience without the mountains?” But then we went to worship in Moby Arena. And that is where we found NYC- thousands of Brethren youth singing, praying, and worshipping God. That was NYC. The conference has been held at CSU ever since and now it feels like NYC. But I still go up to the Rocky Mountains every year after the conference is over for that slice of heaven.

It seems as though whenever Marty and I go on vacation we always find our way to the mountains. Be it the Alleghenies in Potter County, PA; Denali or the Chugach Mountains in Alaska; Mount Battie or Cadillac Mountain in Maine; or the Rockies. I am drawn to the mountains when I am looking for renewal, rest, and a sense of God's presence. And I am not the only one.

In scripture we find many of God's people going to the mountain to meet with God. Moses' treks up Mt. Sinai are some of the most memorable. Thunder and lightning, thick clouds and a trumpet blast, fire and smoke terrified the people when God was in residence. The Israelites waited at the foot of the mountain, trembling with fear while Moses hiked to the top to visit with God. They were no doubt glad that he was going up and they weren't. The mountain is where God gave Moses important lessons and laws for the people, including the Ten Commandments.

In the New Testament the mountain is also ce where significant events happen. It is a place of revelation. Many of the most important events in the life of Jesus happened on the mountain including one of his temptations, the calling of his disciples, and the Transfiguration. He goes to the mountain for rest, renewal, transformation, retreat and prayer. He goes to the mountain to be close to God. When Jesus goes up the mountain you want to pay attention, because something important is about to happen.

The mountaintop is a place of divine encounter with God. In Scripture the mountain top is what the Celtic Christians would call a “Thin Place.” This is the place where the veil between heaven and earth is pulled back for a just an instant; the place where the divine and the human meet and recognize each other. It is a holy place. It is a sacred place that demands attention.

A few things we need to remember about the mountain top- it isn't always easy to get there, but the view is always worth it. And it isn't always easy to come back down. One absolutely lovely day while we were in Maine, Marty and I decided to hike up Dorr Mountain. Granite steps were carved into the mountainside hiking up was like walking up stairs- big ones, at a steep elevation. By the time we were half way up we were exhausted. We sat on the large flat rocks, thirstily drank our water, ate our lunch, admired the view and decided that the view was pretty good from here and we could very happily go back down without feeling like we missed something by not going the whole way to the top. So we did and although the hike back down was faster it strained our muscles all the same. I always find it hard to leave the mountain.

From the mountaintop you have a view that you cannot see from the ground, the air is cleaner and clearer, you feel a sense of accomplishment that you made it so far, and there are usually fewer people at the top- especially if you can't get there by car and have to hike on your own two legs. At the top of the mountain you are separated from all of the troubles and trials of daily life. It is usually very quiet and peaceful. For me the mountain top is a Thin Place where I feel closer to God. It is a place where I am open to hearing what God has to say to me.

The amazing thing is that you can find Thin Places anywhere. You don't have to be on the top of a mountain. You can be standing in your own kitchen, working in the garden, sitting in worship or beside a hospital bed, walking or riding your bike on the Prairie Path. Thin places are all around us if we only open our eyes and our hearts to see them.

Thin Places are those places where we get a glimpse of God, a taste of heaven, a sense of a higher calling. They are the places where we drop our defenses, open our hearts to God, and wait to see what will happen. We can experience a Thin Place in seconds, in the blink of an eye, or after hours of prayer and reflection.

Thin Places can be overwhelming and confusing. They can also be inviting and compelling. The way we experience these holy moments depends on how ready we are to sense God's presence in a more intense and personal way. In scripture and in history Thin Places are places of transformation. Once we realize that we are in a Thin Place, once we find ourselves on the mountaintop, we have a responsibility to respond to God and then to reflect that encounter in our lives. Moses came down from the mountain a changed man. So did Jesus. Many of the youth and adults who participate in NYC come home changed in significant ways. I certainly did. Maybe you did too.

For many NYC is a Thin Place- a place where it is possible to touch and be touched by God. A place where the door between heaven and earth is cracked open just long enough for a glimpse. It is a setting where we cross the border between the human and the divine. And we do it in the most ordinary of ways. Worship services, workshops, small groups, hikes, recreation, service projects, lunch in the dining hall; ordinary activities that take on special meaning when we invite the Holy Spirit to move in and among us.

That is why NYC is so important. That is why this is my ninth one. That is why I go back year after year and work on the staff- enduring long hours, little sleep, and rude adult advisors. That is why we are sending Arbie and Renee. That is why Walt and these young adults have given almost two years of their lives to planning the conference.

While we are in Colorado I ask for your prayers that we would be opening and willing to find God and that you would be open and willing to step into the Thin Places right here at home.

Our closing hymn was the theme song for the 1978 National Youth Conference. It has become a favorite at youth camps over the years. I think it has endured all these years because it captures our desires and hopes for meeting God on the mountain; in the Thin Places.

“Power to live. Courage to fly.”

May it be so for all of us who seek God. Amen.