

There's something higher: Keep climbing beyond Scripture



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HIGHLAND VIEWS

My brother and I were exploring some trails in the Smokies and the Blue Ridge a few weeks ago. We didn't see a soul (or a boot-sole) for miles of meandering steps through forests where the only sounds were our breathing, an occasional bird, the wind in the tree-crowns and bubbling rivulets. It's like hiking straight into "beauty" itself.

High on one ridge the thick woods suddenly opened to a wide view across rolling mountains with streams flowing down and green flowing up into cottony clouds. We ate our simple snacks without many words. You just can't chatter much when a scene is so amazing. Two ravens swooped close, startling us with their swooshing wings before soaring onward and upward.

After walking miles in the wilds, my mind wanders to questions, both serious and playful. What are the names of all these mosses and trees ... and who cares what their names are? What would the First Peoples see and hear out in these wild places that I might be missing? Where are the owls hiding? What would we do if a bear suddenly stumbled out of hibernation and we were the first food it's seen in months?

I recall a pack-full of questions we pondered back in seminary days, when we were hiking around the big ideas that theology kicks up. The trail guide we used was called a Bible, and one strange theme treks through The Book like the long thread of the Appalachian Trail: "high places." What is it about high places that make some folks run to the summit while others run for cover?

Many of us can remember the major events in biblical history with these dramatic images: Moses on Mount Si-



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Chris Highland photographed this icefall on a hike last weekend.

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nai, Elijah ascending Mount Carmel, Solomon building a high temple. The Prophet Isaiah sings, "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the one announcing peace" (52:7).

Then, much later, Jesus gives his famous "sermon" on the mountain, hears voices on the mount of "Transfiguration," climbs up the Mount of Olives and the cross of Calvary. The expedition ends in The Revelation, when the heavenly city falls from the sky and all believers hike up those golden trails into everlasting glory.

There's a lot of climbing going on it scripture. The whole story, beginning to end goes up and down — we almost need a mountaineer guide!

God is called "The Most High." God's

home is above. No need to care about the lowly earth and the "fallen." What's UP is what matters. Think of the Greek gods of Olympus.

For many, it seems, enlightenment comes on mountains (lightning may have something to do with that). For others, there is a dark side to mountains as well.

As ministry students, we read about the dangers of "high places." The Lord seems very angry about what happens in some high areas. Take this verse from Leviticus when the Lord is demanding obedience. If the people don't obey, "I will destroy your high places" (26:30). Only officially approved altars and sacrifices are acceptable. Again, in the First Book of Kings, Solomon "sac-

rificed and offered incense at the high places" (3:3). That was OK, as long as the king was spilling the blood of thousands of animals to the Most High (the Highest God).

Then, in the Second Book of Kings, Hezekiah "did what was right in the sight of the Lord" and "removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole" (the pole Moses set up to heal the people — 18:4). Who needs a high place when His Highness now camps in the lowlands?

Why do I drag out these ancient texts? Because few people ever read these parts of the Bible and even fewer realize that mountains mattered very much centuries ago. In fact, we could say, faith came from mountain "highs."

Some people feel closer to God in the high country — high deserts, plains or peaks. Others just feel closer to nature, and maybe themselves. A person may have faith to move mountains (1 Corinthians 13) or even throw a mountain into the sea by praying (Mark 11:23), but we might wonder why a mountain can't simply be a mountain?

The alpine preacher of Palestine once said a thoughtful shepherd will leave a whole herd on the mountain to find the lost sheep (Matthew 18:12), but he climbed his last peak because, we're told, everyone is lost.

Here in the mountains of Western North Carolina we have people who love high places — even when we get lost sometimes — and there are those who say there is something higher.

I think I'll leave the heavy books behind and just keep climbing up.

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