

Dear friends of Vital Signs Ministries,

September 2020

You can tell right away from the photos on this front page that I've been thinking about mountains quite a bit these last couple of weeks. Thinking and yes, climbing a little bit too. And so, in this month's letter, I'm going to tell you about our latest Colorado adventure, share just two of the life lessons emphasized in that experience, comment briefly on a few of the "mountain Scriptures" that have been on my mind, and quickly catch you up on a few of our other ministry activities. So, if you're ready, let's hit the trail.



The Kite Lake Trail is the one we hit at 5 A.M. on August 26th. This little lake is about 6.5 miles northwest of Alma, Colorado and it's the embarkation point for those planning to climb any (or all) of four 14ers that are nearby: Bross, Lincoln, Cameron, and Democrat. The "we" of the party was made up of a father and son team, Mark and Sterling Fichter; Ron Scheffler; Sterling's friend Ryan Dinville; and me.

We had camped out at the trailhead the night before – and a very cold and rainy night it turned out to be. Few of us enjoyed much sleep. Nevertheless, awake at 4:30, we breakfasted, strapped on our packs, grabbed our hiking poles and flashlights, and, while still quite dark, started up the mountain. Our hoped-for destination was the top of Republic Mountain, 14,155 feet in elevation. (Yes, the common name is Mt. Democrat but that began after some ex-Confederate goldminers objected to a nearby peak being designated Mt. Lincoln. They then renamed Republic Mountain in favor of the political party of the Confederacy "to even the scales." For that, and other obvious reasons, I prefer to use the peak's historic name.)

Anyhow, enough 19th Century history; back to the hike. The rain had stopped and, once we could finally start looking around us, it was a striking scene indeed. Being above timberline, you don't have the lovely sights of pine forests or tumbling streams that Colorado is rightly famous for. But the stark and dramatic vistas of rock and sky that are presented to high-country hikers have a rugged, inspiring beauty all their own.



This climb represented an absolutely wonderful gift for me -- one I was almost convinced would never come my way again. For after climbing my first 14er on my 65th birthday (Mt. Bierstadt) and then another (Mt. Quandary) on my 66th birthday, I have had a frustrating combination of things keep me from another try. A torn calf muscle, a torn meniscus, arthritis, even a terrible cold on the eve of my 69th birthday just 2 months ago -- all these and a couple more have kept me grounded -- not from my regular walking regimen, biking, or even more modest Colorado hikes -- but from trying a 14er. I figured last month's missed opportunity was probably my last shot. But God generously gave me another chance, this time to climb with friends. And so, despite the terrible hard work involved, I considered this adventure a great mercy from God whether I actually made it to the summit or not.

However, as you can see, I did make it. And I wish I could adequately describe to you the joy, the satisfaction, the thanksgiving, the inspiration, and the beauty my friends and I enjoyed there at the summit. No, you don't forget the toil, pain, or frustration of the climb. But summiting is certainly an invigorating and memorable thrill. Yet underlying all of those happy experiences (at least for this particular hiker) is a profound sense of humility too. After all, the mountain is so majestic and big and unchanging and mysterious. What is man in such a scene? Furthermore, the panorama seen from the peak underscores how this awesome mountain is itself but a small bit of the grand scheme. Look at all those other mountains. See the valleys, rivers; note the billowing clouds moving through a massive sky. Feel the cold, whipping wind. And that's not even figuring what's beyond your sight -- all the planets, stars, galaxies, mysteries too deep and too numerous to imagine. And overarching all is the throne of the Sovereign, Creator God. Oh, my; the wise heart bows in admiration and praise.

But, as I said, the summit experience was glorious. The smiles. The camaraderie. The pride we all took in holding onto the American flag I had packed up for the moment. Conversations with other hikers. The prayers. Drinking in the view. Taking photographs. The chance to rest from what had been a long and particularly difficult trek: very steep ascents, very rocky terrain, and all traversed with very old legs and feet! How I thanked the Lord for the strength, perseverance, and protection He provided. And, of course, after the heady experience at the summit, our prayers shifted for the long journey down.

But what of the life lessons that I mentioned at the beginning of this letter? Here's the first. I was reminded just how critically important is the "buddy system" for all of life. In my previous 14er experiences I was by myself. But I climbed Republic Mountain with friends and I cannot tell you what an amazing difference that made. Encouragement. Accountability. Assistance. A sharing of both the hardship and the happiness. Conversation (between gulping breaths). Prayers prayed out loud as we hiked and as we rested. Looking after each other. And being reminded to be an example of courage, perseverance, good cheer, spiritual appreciation, patient and safe climbing, friendliness to others, and so on. I couldn't help but remember that the famous verse about fellowship in Psalm 133 ("Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell in unity.") is connected later in the psalm with a mountain metaphor of its own; namely, the pleasantness of the dew which descends on the mountain of Zion. Neat.



Republic Mountain (14,155)

And the second lesson? Well, the illustration of it is my oft-repeated prayer during the morning's climb: "Lord, please help me make it to the next sitting rock." As you can guess, this relates to the next place I'd find to rest and gather strength to climb a bit higher. You don't climb a mountain in one movement. You take it, quite literally, one careful step at a time. So, what a helpful comfort it is that God provides all needed graces in our moment of trial. He doesn't pour out those mercies for next week's challenges

or even tomorrow's. No, our God is existential and intimately involved in providing help for His children "in the immediate now." Whether the test involves pain or grief, confusion or worry, disappointment or seemingly unanswered prayer, we can depend on God's present-tense enablement. Remember the 1865 hymn by Swedish songwriter Lina Sandell? "Day by day and with each passing moment, strength I find to meet my trials here. Trusting in my Father's wise bestowment, I've no cause for worry or for fear. He Whose heart is kind beyond all measure gives unto each day what He deems best.; lovingly, it's part of pain and pleasure, mingling toil with peace and rest." Amen. Okay, now for a few of those "mountain Scriptures" that so dramatically impressed me during (and following) the hike.



* "Before the mountains were born or You gave birth to the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God." (Psalm 90:2) Standing atop that big, ancient mountain and surveying the dozens of other mountains in the arc around you makes this observation of Moses extremely profound and memorable. Our God is not merely bigger and older than the mountains. He created them and, at this very moment, "holds all things together by the word of His power."

* “Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand and marked off the heavens by the span, and calculated the dust of the earth by the measure, and weighed the mountains in a balance and the hills in a pair of scales?” (Isaiah 40:12) Again, having traversed thousands and thousands of rocks and boulders as we scaled Republic Mountain and knowing that they were but an infinitesimal portion of the mountain’s surface – not to mention the millions of hulking mega-tons underneath – it is a mind-blowing revelation that God has weighed that mountain in a balance. And that’s not even considering God’s “calculating the dust of the earth.” Wow.

* “You covered [the earth] with the deep as with a garment. The waters were standing above the mountains. At Your rebuke they fled. At the sound of Your thunder, they hurried away. The mountains rose, the valleys sank down to the place which You established for them.” (Psalm 104:6-7)

One might not think that climbing a mountain would stimulate meditations on the universality of the Genesis flood. But it does so for me. Think about it. Looking down that single mountain as well as scanning a hundred miles in each direction underscores the miraculous enormity of that flood. In turn, one considers God’s holy judgment on sin; His mercy as emblazoned in the rainbow; the tremendous effects which the flood (and all that weight of water) had on geology, continental drift, the extinction of dinosaurs, the fossil record, weather patterns, archaeology, anthropology, and so much more. Fascinating.

My space is running out here so let me leave the mountains and come back to Omaha (as it were) for a quick review of what Vital Signs Ministries has been up to in recent weeks. We just had our quarterly Governing Board meeting last week where it was observed, “For the quarantines getting tighter all the time, you guys have managed to remain as busy as ever!” Well, we truly bless the Lord for that.

The prayers and sidewalk counseling at the Planned Parenthood abortion business continue as does the creation of our 9-page “Anti-Boredom” Packets for the residents of the senior care facilities. We just sent out #29 in that series! Of course, we pray daily for the opportunity to begin again our schedule of “When Swing Was King” shows for our dear friends in those 12 facilities. Also, we are involved in more social media action than ever before with articles, open letters, links, memes, old “Vital Signs” radio programs, etc. being uploaded every day. My writing is also expressed in the brand new Vital Signs Ministries website and in our increased personal correspondence. In addition, there were a couple of special speaking engagements, a lot of hospitality and “small dose” ministry with individuals, and the honor of conducting the home-going service of a dearly beloved friend, Linda Wilson.

In summation, we all have mountains in our lives and they are sometimes very difficult to climb. Yet God’s grace is ever-present to strengthen us, teach us, guide and protect us. Until next month...

Denny