

## **A DEEPER LOOK 1: “AT THE FACE OF GOD”**

*“When the Ram’s horn sounds a long blast, then the people may go up on the mountain.” Exodus 19: 13*

I have just returned from a few days in the Black Hills of SD. There is no mystery to me why those mountains are sacred to the Native Americans. For us flatlanders, all mountains are majestic, and amazing. Last week I had the privilege to stand on the outstretched arm of Crazy Horse Mountain. Many of you have seen the mountain from the visitor center vantage point, (Mt) some of you may have seen it from the tour bus vantage point, (closer) but how many have seen it from here (Face)? I was inspired with this message at that moment!

It’s time for us to meet God face to face! It’s time for us to take a deeper look into the sacred and holy things of God, so that our lives might better reflect His; so that our lives might become more **meaningful**, and less **fearful**; so that our lives might become more **useful** to God, and less **useless** to the causes of the Kingdom. I’m not talking about meeting God at the moment of our death; I’m talking about meeting God at this moment in our lives! So many of us have a Visitor Center view of God, and it’s time to get face to face.

Our scripture text for today reminds us of a mountain top experience Moses and the children of Israel encountered at the base of Mt. Sinai; it will be informative for us.

Look with me at Exodus 19, beginning with verse 3:

*“Then Moses climbed the mountain to appear before God. The Lord called to him from the mountain and said, ‘Give these instructions to the family of Jacob; announce it to the descendants of Israel: ‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians. You know how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now, if you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own special treasure from among all the peoples on earth; for all the earth belongs to me. And you will be my kingdom of priests, my holy nation.’” Exodus 19: 3-6*

The nation of Israel has been rescued from the bondage of Pharaoh in Egypt, and brought through the wilderness to the edge of Mt Sinai. In spite of their frequent grumbling and complaining about the lack of water and food, and the threats to Moses that life was better in Egypt, God has led them to this Mountain. It's almost as if the mountain marks a turning point in their history;...it does. This mountain is about to become a point of decision.

God calls Moses to come up the mountain for some conversation. Remember this was the same mountain where God first found Moses and spoke to him from the unquenchable flames of a burning bush. Moses goes and listens: "Remind the people how I brought them from Egypt, how I called them to myself, and commissioned them to become my people. They were once no people, now they are my people, and oh yeah, next time you come, invite the people to come with you..." Stop and think about this for just a second. God is actually inviting the whole nation of Israel to join with Moses and meet God face to face on this sacred mountain. This **invitation** is no small thing.

You will remember from Israel's history that from the time of Adam's fall from grace in the Garden of Eden, God hid His face from the people, instead choosing to reveal himself in dreams and visions; often with smoke and fire as 'symbols' of His character, and his presence. Even this story has some confusion about when and how the Israelites were to approach the mountain, and just a few short chapters later, Moses begs God to let him see his face, and God says no, instead passing by so that Moses is only able to see God's backside. But here, and now, the invitation is uttered that when the Ram's horn loudly blows, the whole nation has permission to come up on the mountain. Probably God's face would still be shrouded in a cloud, but they have never before been invited to get so close!

To help us grasp the reality and significance and seriousness of this Mountaintop encounter I will use my trip to Crazy Horse Mountain as a metaphor to illustrate the various stages of our relationship with God.

### 1. THE “VISITOR CENTER” RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.

Like all good tourists, our van load of guys entered the parking lot, and soon made our way to the front desk of the visitor’s center. While our host made the arrangements for our trip, I observed other groups preparing for their tours up the mountain, while hundreds of people wandered about the world class museum, around the gift shop, over to the studio and finally, out to the veranda for a glimpse of the majestic view of this massive mountain being carved to honor the great Sioux leader, Crazy Horse.

Most of these people were friendly, some were stressed, (so sad), and a few were chatting with the various merchants and vendors plying their crafts and art right there in the museum. I heard one of the dumbest things I’ve ever heard standing there that day. A woman had just purchased a copy of a book from an elderly Sioux man, who was it’s author. She then asked him to sign it, and then asked for a picture of him holding it. He rather humbly agreed to all this, when she uttered these words just before she flashed her camera: “Now look real Indian!” I couldn’t believe it! That’s beside the point.

The point is, these people were gathered at this spot and at this time in history for the collective purpose of experiencing, (or at least seeing from afar) the unbelievable work of carving a mountain. I thought at one point, “God did pretty good with the original, but I guess we have our Anglo hero’s carved on a mountain a stone’s throw to the North...” Lets go back to our text:

*“You have seen with your own eyes what I did to Egypt, and how I have carried you on eagles’ wings and **brought you here to me**”. Ex. 19: 4*

It was God who called Israel out of Egypt, it was God who carried them through the wilderness, and it was God who brought them to this mountain. Just like our group at the visitor's center, we were there to see the mountain...but little did we know at that moment. You see, we had been invited there that day by one of Korzak's daughters for a special tour. We were excited, but we didn't know what lay in store. The best we could imagine was to ride in one of the open air tour buses that made hundreds of trips the two miles to the base of the mountain. We were about to find out!

Let me just draw the point more closely. All of us have been invited to know God, but many of us have settled for the visitor center relationship. We'd rather keep the brochure, than experience the depth of really knowing God, and meeting Him face to face.

Many people choose to remain visitors with God, and choose not to go deeper. Many of us have been introduced to Jesus, we have been set free from our own bondage's by the Savior, we are familiar with the family of God, we interact on the verandas of life, and put on smiles for strangers at church; but we remain on the casual observer level. Some of us have remained a visitor, because we have believed that is all there is. Some of us have chosen to remain visitors because progressing any further frightens us, or threatens our sense of self-control. Some of us today need to move our relationship to the next level.

The Israelites were living at this time on the visitor center level with God. That's why they grumbled and complained so profusely. They were expecting Moses to provide for them, rather than relying on God to be their sufficiency. They were **acquainted** with God, but didn't really **know** God. God wanted to change all that. Let's consider the second level of that progressive change now.

## **2. THE TOUR BUS RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD**

*“If you will listen to me and keep my covenant then out of all peoples **you shall become my prized possession**;...you shall be my kingdom of priests, my holy nation.”. Ex. 19: 5-6*

We noticed that there were a number of groups of people being organized onto these converted open air school buses. Their adventure included rules about staying seated, and restrictions about keeping limbs inside the bus proper, each was given a silly looking hard hat. There was a speech about staying within the boundaries roped off with yellow tape. And then, off they went to the base of the mountain for a view up Crazy Horses’ nostril.

Did you notice the conditional part of this verse? IF you will listen and keep my covenant...The next step in a relationship involves listening, not just talking, giving, not just taking. It often involves some boundaries, rules if you will, laws to be precise. The nation of Israel was just about to receive the conditions for their new relationship: It involved some commandments, a top 10 list, and a “few” others.

The Tour Bus level relationship with God, is more exciting, more adventurous than the visitor center level, though as we’ll discover shortly, not the ultimate. The Tour Bus level includes restrictions, boundaries, legal stuff, guidelines, and ‘conditions’ for our relationship.

That is the way with us when we progress deeper as Christians. We can enjoy the fellowship of the visitor center for so long, then most of our hearts yearn to go deeper, to know more, to experience more, to see more, to BE more.

Many of us are living at this ‘tour bus’ stage with God. We have been **saved**, and we’ve been **called** to belong to God, to be God’s chosen ones, and now we are seeking to be faithful and consistent in fulfilling the laws, remaining within the boundaries, maintaining the conditions. Some of us have in fact grown quite comfortable in this legal state. Where everything is black and white, right and wrong are clearly known, (especially when applied to others).

Some of us live at this level because we believe this is all there is. Some of us live at this level because we think we have some control. We know what's expected, we know the rules, we keep them the best we can. But notice this.

God says to Moses, there is more. There is another place to which we have been invited. It is the very presence of God. "Next time you come to the mountain, bring the people with you!" We can not overlook the significance of this invitation. From the Garden, till this very moment, sin has separated the creation, from the creator, and NOW, God IS WANTING TO REESTABLISH THAT INTIMACY. Do you see it? God is not satisfied with a bunch of law-abiding citizens living in almost as much bondage to their laws as to their sins. God wants us to know the freedom, and the intimacy that can only come when we are deeply known; face to face.

That's the meaning of the third stage and lets consider it now

### **3. THE FACE TO FACE RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.**

*"The Lord will descend upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people...and when the ram's horn sounds, **they may go up on the mountain.**"*

We were escorted to a Radisson Hotel van, given our hard hats, belted in, and whisked off to the north side of Crazy Horse's left ear! We were able to walk freely all along the arm, take pictures, ask questions, make cell phone calls, observe the progress, feel the granite, see the face...face to face!

BY saying to Moses, "let the people come to me, and see me face to face, even within the boundaries we have set", He was saying; "I wish to be fully known." He was saying, "these laws are helpful and necessary, but it is the heart issues that I want to define our relationship from now on". "We have lived as visitors long enough; we've enjoyed the bus ride long enough, it's time to get on top".

“You have found the law keeping tedious and restrictive, come feel the wind in your hair, see the bulldozers push the massive stones over the edge, hear and see the drills boring holes 6 feet per minute in solid granite; come be free, be my bride.”

So God has invited the Israelites up on the mountain, to take a Deeper look, to meet with God...face to face. Don't you wonder what the Israelites decided to do? Let me show you. In Chapter 20 immediately following the deliverance of the law this was the people's reaction:

*“When all the people saw how it thundered and the lightning flashed, when they heard the trumpet sound and saw the mountain smoking, they **stood at a distance and trembled with fear.**”*

This was their defining moment and they blew it! They missed the “God Moment” when it came, and forever since remain on the edge of the Holy, looking in. The Jews to this day continue to long for the Messiah, when that day they choose to stand far off! Their history has been defined by a choice they made on the edge of the mountain. God invited them into his intimate presence, and they choose to stand far off.

I sense that we are at a similar mountain, in our world, in our country, in our church, in our lives. We have journeyed for many years in the wilderness. We have done our share of grumbling and complaining. We have many who know the salvation that leads to the visitor center, looking from afar at the mountain of God. We have many who have chosen to take a “Bus Tour” with God. They live under some convoluted boundaries enjoying the sights and sounds of knowing about God, while living without the commitment to fully KNOW God and be known by God. We stand and sit today at the edge of a mountain. God is calling us to come up into his intimate presence, and we must decide!

There is something frightening about thunder and lightning and smoke and mountain shaking, but that is where God lives. God is thundering amongst us, and lighting our way. God is shaking things up and smoke surrounds us on every hand. We are being invited onto the highest mountain we have ever known, to places we have never been, to experience a depth of love and intimacy that scares the snot out of us. Will you stand off or run in?

I'm just as scared as you are. I do pretty well when I can convince myself that I am somewhat in control, but this decision will take all of us out of control! If we want to know God and be fully known by him, we must yield, submit, surrender; even sacrifice all we have known of our past relationships with God. We must as Paul said "Forget what lies behind, and press forward to what lies ahead". That will be difficult, but there's that mountain staring us in the face, and that distant trumpet call growing louder and louder. What we decide today, will determine our **history** (and our **future**) forever. Do you want to go? ALTAR CALL

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