

On the Path

A Sermon on Mount Aeneas

By Keith Hammer

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On September 14th, 1919, the Reverend Eugene Cosgrove delivered a sermon to his congregation at the First Unitarian Church in Helena, Montana, about his trip up Mount Aeneas to overlook Jewel Basin. Indeed, Cosgrove referred to the seven lakes he could see below him – the two Picnic Lakes, four Jewel Lakes and Black Lake – as “flaming jewels.”

The Aeneas trailhead in 1919 would have been at the old Echo Ranger Station a couple miles up Jewel Basin Road from Foothill Road, a site now occupied by a Forest Service gravel pit. It was from this little Ranger Station that Bob Marshall set out on foot in 1928 to survey lands in the Swan Range and South Fork Flathead River country that would later bear his name as one of America’s first Wilderness areas.

Jewel Basin has inspired many and remains an area recommended by the Forest Service for designation as Wilderness by Congress. The following is excerpted from a written account of Reverend Cosgrove’s sermon published soon after as a pamphlet, a copy of which fortunately found its way to the Helena Public Library:

“Hidden away by the Gods, like a necklace of pearls, among the crags and fastnesses of the [Swan] Mountains, lies the Jewel Basin, the enchanted land of this our Montana.

Friends, I have seen the sun set on the minarets of the Alhambra in Spain, and make splendid the dome of the St. Sophia in Constantinople. I have watched the play of color upon the hot sands of the desert of Egypt, with sphinx and pyramid - these ghostly shadows of eternity - rising like exhalations out of the deepening twilight sky. I have made the trail through the hinterland of the Canadian Rockies to where the Aurora Borealis from the Polar skies make the northern night glorious half the cycle of the year. But for kaleidoscopic lights and shadows; for octaves of tone and color for stupendous vistas, and the unending variety of the moods and forms of Nature, Jewel Basin is, to the vision of my experience, the most charmed and charming spot in all the world.

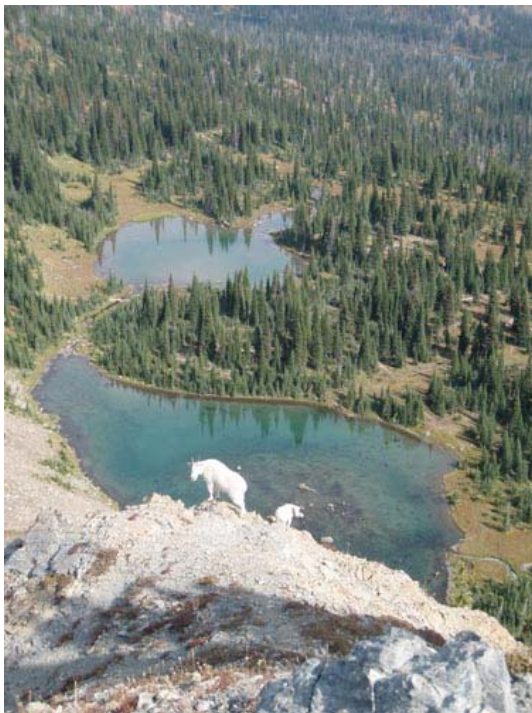
It lies crooned and cradled on the summit of Mount Aeneas, and Mount Aeneas lies within easy distance of Big Fork at the northeast end of Flathead Lake. Hither the roads goes to Echo Lake, and on for four miles through one of the loveliest forests I have seen anywhere on the continent of North America.

Our party left the Forest Service station at the foot of the mountain shortly after dawn, and in two hours and a half we had traveled the five and a half miles to the summit. As I said, our party began the ascent just after dawn, and reached the summit as the sun was creeping over the peaks beyond. Behind and far away stretched the Flathead valley, yellow with the sheen of the ripened wheat fields, and, as the sun rose upon it, the ever widening panorama seemed to be a mighty Nile of hammered-out gold.

Near the peak a stream flows out of a small glacier, and this marks the beginning of a descending series of seven lakes, which, in their turn, are terraced together by a succession of waterfalls. These seven lakes, as I saw them that midsummer day, looked like flaming jewels---amethysts, emeralds, aqua-marines, strung out evenly on a ribbon of silver. Around them, like sleeping kings guarding their precious treasure, rise the perpendicular slopes of the mountains, tossing their shaggy heads into the deep blue of the cloudless sky. With the naked eye, we can see the white forms of two mountain goats lying on a sharp ledge of bare cliff, and catch a glimpse of the royal elk as he makes his swift course across the end of the lake to the forest beyond. Far in the distance rise the peaks of Glacier Park, that, in their white robes of snow, faint and shadowy, look like spirits out of the long, long past.

One should see Jewel Basin at the hour of opposites - that is to say, just when our exquisite northern dawn turns the bastions of rock into flaming altars of the gods, and makes of these russet walls a roofless cathedral where the spirits of the mountain hymn their litanies. Or one should see it when the gloaming comes stealing down the mountainside, like a shy girl half afraid that the slow departing light will reveal her undraped comeliness; and the lights are out upon the high altars, and the vast cathedral of the mountains is wrapped in its black mantle of silence - then should one lift their eyes upon Jewel Basin!"

Keith Hammer grew up hiking, skiing, camping, hunting, and fishing in the Swan Mountains. He has worked a number of jobs, from Forest Service trail worker to logger to backcountry guide, and currently works as an environmental consultant and head of the nonprofit Swan View Coalition. His column appears regularly in this paper and is archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org.



Looking down from Mt. Aeneas on mountain goats and Picnic Lakes, with two of the Jewel Lakes in the distance. Keith Hammer Photo.