A climber’s faith is of the blind, optimistic variety. The prayers frequent ... This rope will hold me if I fall; the nut placement won’t rip out; the weather is going to remain good ... Because by faith we gain knowledge, and sometimes the summit. For that reason, and that reason alone, it’s good to go to church every once in a while. And for me—an average climber with atheistic leanings—that church is Cathedral Peak, in Yosemite National Park’s high country, Tuolumne Meadows.

Plus, I’ve always taken pathological pleasure in calling my grandmother from the pay phone at the Tuolumne Meadows concession stand on the morning of my ascent. “Going to church today, Grandma.”

For decades now, she’s been praying that I might return to the fold. When she finds out it’s just another rock climb, the excitement in her voice drops faster than a loose nut, despite my sincere telling of how John Muir proclaimed: “This I may say is the steeple of Cathedral Peak and receive, as he put it, ‘sermons in stone.’” He claimed the first ascent rights on Cathedral by going up the class 4 ledges (the descent route) on the west side.

Still, no doubt those class 5 moves at the top must have felt pretty damn stout in leather-soled boots. In other words, maybe he did have a religious experience getting up the final airy traverse and the 20 feet or so of exposed climbing to the tabletop-sized summit. (He’d already fallen on a steep snow bank on Cathedral’s flanks but managed to self-arrest, 19th century-style, by digging in his heels.)

Today, Cathedral Peak’s Southeast Buttress is a highly coveted ascent with its perfect granite that features moderate crack and face climbing amid a bliss-inducing alpine setting. Plus, it boasts a summit where you can sit your harness down in exactly the same place as John o’ the Mountains, as well as a host of other Sierra climbing legends, and hundreds of less celebrated folks like you and me. For those reasons and more, the climb is rarely a “poor lonely worshipping” experience. Still, the crowds don’t compare to the mega-church-sized congregations of Yosemite Valley an hour-plus drive away and 8,000 feet lower.

And it’s been crowded for a long time. Steve Roper was calling the Southeast Buttress an “extremely popular climb” way back in 1976. More recently, Peter Croft dubs it the “most popular alpine climb in California,” giving it the “awesome” rank in his book “The Good, The Great, and the Awesome.” With time and the crowds have come some rating changes. Roper rated the buttress a 5.4 in his book, “The Climber’s Guide to the High Sierra.” Croft and his contemporaries like Chris McNamara give it a 5.7. The latter grade feels more frank in a few, short sections, regardless of which of those three climbers you stand next to. But most of the climb feels, oh, 5.6ish.

And there are ways to beat the crowds. Starting off from the trailhead at 4 a.m. is one way, but then that means going to sleep just when the conversation around the Tuolumne Meadows Campground campfire is just getting good. If the weather has been stable and without afternoon thunderstorms—as so often is the case in the mid-to-late summer—it’s possible to get on the climb in the afternoon while the good folks who so wisely adhere to the alpine start are topping out.

Just be sure you are fast. Leaving the car one very late summer afternoon, my brother and I did the last two pitches on a moonless night with one headlamp. It was nothing short of an ascent into darkness, the wrath of the lord upon us. Better to wait for a full moon that rises out of the east over Mono Lake and illuminates the face for late afternoon approaches, and even night climbs if you’re into that kind of thing. Again, only if you are sure there are no thunderheads lurking.

On an earlier Cathedral climb, the importance of an alpine start was verily
shocked into my brother and I. There were clouds in the sky by the time we loitered up the climbers’ trail, but nothing anvil-shaped or thunderous. Benevolent clouds for all we knew. By the time we racked up it was noon. Our first hint of trouble might have been the fact that we had the whole buttress to ourselves. But fools that we are, we started climbing.

Not to be presumptuous, but sitting on the summit block belaying my brother up the last pitch, I felt rejuvenated, marvelous even—as Muir would lose himself staring wistfully at an alpine flower, or a rock. Then, slowly, the air began to crackle like a high power line, and the hair on my arms stood up. So did the hair on my head, mopping the inside of my helmet. Even the rope felt like I just taken it out of the dryer.

Rain, hail, fire and brimstone-type sermons boomed in my pagan head. I was stuck on the tallest thing around, poking into a cloud, and stuck on belay. Eventually (what seemed hours), my brother poked over the top and we got the hell out of there. We received some grace that day. And on the way down, as the storm abated, we looked back up at Cathedral and gained a new appreciation for its role as Tuolumne Meadows’ official lighting rod.

Rather than tempt your maker with carefree disrespect, better to just suck it up and join the faithful throngs observing Cathedral’s congregational hours. Even with the masses, you’ll still find plenty of granite enlightenment. Unlike surfers, climbers frown on dirty looks when racking up at the bottom. Besides, there are really three routes up the buttress, all of them about the same.
difficulty, all of them leading to the same airy summit.

With the conclusion the same, there are bound to be some traffic jams near the top. Thankfully, by geological inspiration, there is a wide belay ledge one pitch from the top to rest and wait your turn. Just be careful not to knock the loose rock lying around up there. Knowing that, love one another and wear a helmet even though most of the loose rock has been swept clean. Cathedral Peak is, after all, an alpine climb and deserves respect—all six pitches or so of it. For many the Southwest Buttress represents their first climb that far away from the road. It was mine, and I remember it well with acres of clarity. Perhaps for that reason, I find myself returning to it almost every year just to exfoliate some winter rust from the limbs. And due to its moderate grade and being situated in one hell of a pretty place (can we use that word around here?), it’s a good place for a tune up before getting on a more serious peak. If this is your first alpine climb the view from the top is nothing short of motivational. Mount Conness’s West Ridge, Whorl Mountain, Matterhorn Peak, Mount Dana, Mount Ritter and Banner, Mount Lyle, not to mention Unicorn Peak, Echo Peak (hidden behind the ever-lovely Matthes Crest) and holy of holies, Eichorn Pinnacle, standing proudly like some sort of Chamonix aiguille—Cathedral’s dapper (dare we say sexy?) cousin straight out of the French Alps.

In fact, it’s nearly mandatory to combine the North Face after Cathedral. It’s blasphemy not to. Especially being that the improbable-looking summit can be reached in just one 5.4 pitch. Well worth it.

But first you have to get up there. As mentioned, there are many ways to go. No way is the right way, but a more southern start will add almost a rope length to the climb. Then again, further up and to the right you get to climb on these really cool knobs, which incidentally get their own name in geology textbooks, “Cathedral Peak granodiorite,” characterized by large feldspar crystals. About halfway up every route, one gets the feldspar experience. A few feet down from the famous chimney the granodiorite gets downright inspiring. Can’t miss it.

And speaking of the chimney. This is where it gets congested because, well, it’s a lot of fun unless you’re wearing a pack. There are ways to go on either side, but there’s something to be said for pulling out of the chimney and grabbing the thank-god-hold up high as you lean out 400-plus feet over the shrinking lodgepoles below.

From there, find some small belay ledges and hang your feet over the edge and wait for your partner to peek through the top of the chimney. It’s a beautiful sight. But then Cathedral Peak tends to open up a whole set of possibilities, and the climbing just gets better the higher you go. Keep the faith.