

*Go therefore and make disciples of  
all nations . . . .  
Mt 28:19*



*Allez, faites de toutes les nations  
des disciples . . . .  
Mt 28:19*

# CANADIAN ORTHODOX MESSENGER

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## Ascent to Mt Tabor : the 'Group of Twelve' expedition

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—by Reader Michael Luciuk, St Mark's Church, Yorkton SK

On Wednesday night, 21 June 2006, twelve young Orthodox Christians gathered in Wells Grey Provincial Park in BC to begin a mountain trek together. They came from Alberta, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan, some driving up to 18 hours. After greeting each other, they gathered first for evening prayers, and then for discussing final plans. A temporary "parish," under the protection of St Barbara the Great Martyr, was formed.

"The Group of Twelve" is an Orthodox adventure, led by Priest John Hainsworth from Victoria and made up of him and eleven other members. This year its mission was to have twelve brave souls undergo an intensive five-day outdoor hike in the Rocky Mountains of Canada. The expedition goal was for young Orthodox Christians to bond, study the Scriptures, and enjoy the glory of God's creation together. The experience was part of what is hoped will be a series of expeditions, open to young adults between the ages of 19 and 30. In addition to the hiking, each member was required to present a two-hour seminar, and to cook a group supper with another person. Each year the Group of Twelve will have a different Great Feast theme. This year it was the Transfiguration.

### Day One: the beginning

After morning prayers, we drove down a deserted road to reach the trail. Despite some changing of plans and a squirrel-ravaged backpack, everyone was ready to depart. Battle Mountain Trail to the first camp consisted of a gruelling eight km of uphill forest switchbacks and a two km tundra hike, with a total elevation of 1167 m. Though it started out easy enough, soon we were testing our bodies to the limit. Going up a hill at a 50-degree angle with 40-pound packs exhausted us. While at first we talked freely and marvelled at nature, we soon talked sporadically and kept our eyes focused on the ground in

front of us. Soon we had problems in keeping the group together, because a few in front were setting a pace unbearable to those behind. A delicate balance between pressing ahead and staying bearable had to be set. Though exhausted, we had a beautiful view of a thunderstorm in the valley below. One member of the group was having trouble with the pace that many dismissed as a lower fitness-level; but after someone switched her pack with his, it was discovered that she had a badly designed pack, and it was throwing her back out of alignment.

This is a metaphor of Christian life: at the start it may seem easy but it gets harder. We as a church are on this ascent together, and can only finish together. We must understand that though others seem to hold us back, it is not always a lack of asceticism but the different burdens we carry. It is only by sharing these burdens that we can learn to appreciate each other's journey and complete it. In between breaths, the group sang hymns and songs, and planned music for future services. Each clearing in the trees would raise our hopes that we had reached our destination, only to be dashed by another twenty minutes of walking. Finally after eight hours, 12 km, and two river crossings, we found Fight Lake, our campsite. Through a brief rain which dampened our spirits a bit, we set up our tents, made a campfire, and cooked supper. It was a blessing that at this site, someone had already built an outhouse and a bear case. After warming up by the fire, we quickly said some prayers and went to sleep, shivering in the damp -5 C weather.

### Day Two: foretaste of the Kingdom

Next morning, we climbed out of our tents, stiff and sore from the day before. It truly was a blessing to feel the sun, and it further increased our confidence in God's plan. After breakfast and prayers, we discussed the the Transfiguration, and in particular,

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the Old Testament figures Elijah and Moses and their relationship to it. We then decided to take a day to rest and explore the area surrounding Fight Lake. We split into three smaller groups: one to explore a shelter that had been sighted, another to find a nearby lake and swim in it, and a third to tackle the smaller Mt Phillip (400m). Freed from our packs, my group seemed to float over tundra, snow, and fallen trees to reach the mountain, which we did quite quickly, but far off course, and with only a straight rock face to climb. At the top—a breathtaking view—we settled down for a relaxing lunch and fellowship, and erected an Orthodox cross. Perceiving the image of God in all this beauty seemed to make the trip worth it, and somehow the refusal of St Peter's suggestion that the disciples stay on Mt Tabor was in the back of our minds. We knew that God had something better planned for us.

Going back, we decided to slide down the side of a steep hill, led by the priest (of course)! It's an amazing experience, back-country sliding at the end of June. Wet and tired, but content, we trudged through a flowery mountain meadow to the camp. That evening we discussed the Transfiguration in the liturgy and music. Relaxing around a campfire, swatting away mosquitoes, I was struck by how beautiful and peaceful it was up there. Amazingly, during evening prayers, the sun set as we sang "O Glad-some Light." We retired to our tents feeling very alive.

### **Day Three: assembling of the Church**

Next day we hiked up over Ridge 51 to the what would be our base camp, the base of Battle Mountain. After an easy climb, we reached the valley beneath the mountain. There were two cold, pure-tasting waterfalls there, cascading down the mountain. We set up camp, dug a toilet and made a bear hang. Unfortunately the latter proved extremely difficult, as there were packs-worth of food, and it was decided that some of the food would be burnt. After ravaging the food down to one pack, we proceeded up the mountain to find a site for liturgy. Half way up, there was a fine spot with a big flat rock, and others forming an enclosure facing east. A waterfall roared by it, and flowers and trees surrounded it. It was as if God Himself had already prepared the church. We found a cupped circular rock with notches for rope to make a censer and proceeded to erect the altar with twelve flat stones. A cross was then erected and altar stands made as we sang "O Lord, save Your people." This chapel would be our place of worship and discussion for the next two days.

We then escaped the plus 30-degree weather by wading down the waterfalls and swimming in the river. That night we discussed the significance of the Transfiguration icon, along with a live demonstration of it. We noted that this icon is sometimes placed where the Resurrection

icon would go. The reason? Because even though all will be resurrected, only by transfiguration will we be able to bear the light of Christ. (We also discussed some implications of the darkness surrounding Christ in the icon.) After evening prayers and a session in which we compiled the liturgy from the six parishes represented, we shared some "Battle Mountain Fondue" (chocolate saved from the food purge), and retired to sleep.

### **Day Four: the ascent beyond words**

We rose early to participate in the Liturgy, surrounded by the icon of God's creation. Though I could fill pages about it, words would fail to fully record this amazing event. It was a life-changing experience. How does one explain an encounter with God? If we had left for home that moment, the trip would have been worth it; but God had something better planned. After a fellowship meal we began our ascent. The climb was tough over snow and rocks. At one point there was only a straight drop beside us. At last we reached the ridge line. After leaving our packs, we proceeded to conquer the final trek to the summit. Tired and dehydrated, we arrived at the cairn, filled with joy for the amazing view lying before us. We stood on the top of the world (2367 m), overlooking the Rockies, seemingly filled with the strength that God, in all His glory, had given us. It was hard not to be humbled by the mountain, and to appreciate God's love for us even more.

We felt that we knew what the disciples would have felt when they had journeyed up Tabor. The ascent is like the Christian journey, hard to the last breath: you will feel pain, but also joy. Twelve crosses were blessed and given to each member, and a cross was left in the cairn. We shared lunch, soaking in the view, and then had a huge snowball fight to cool off. We then went to the smaller summit and shared our experience of the mountain. Very slowly we forced ourselves to depart. The climb down was victorious and filled with running and sliding on snow slopes. Supper led to evening prayers and a seminar on monasticism and what role the Transfiguration plays in it. Lying beside the campfire, we listened to the recounting of each other's journey to Christ and took in the star-filled sky.

### **Day Five: back to the world**

On Monday morning we did the Akathist "Glory to God in All Things." The service seemed to be made for that moment, surrounded as we were by the mountains, the trees, the snow, and the waters. It was an amazing service, again beyond explanation. We left behind in the altar a document signed by each one of us, describing why this was sacred ground. After packing

up, we hiked the 14 km back to our cars. Renewed, we flew down the mountain, physically running the last two kilometres. Curiously, in some ways it was harder on our way down than on the way up, since much of one's mind is occupied with trying to keep from falling. How much easier is the ascent to Christ than the descent to the world! After reaching our cars, we took some refreshment, gazed at Hemlechken Falls, and discussed how different philosophical ideas affect our view of the Transfiguration event. Exhausted from the heat, we enjoyed a meal which beat all the other nightly feasts. Then we stayed up long into the night, talking and realizing that the end of this adventure was fast approaching.

### **Day Six: the end of the expedition**

The next morning we packed our tents one last time and had our last prayer service. The Gospel was, fittingly, about Jesus' telling His disciples to go into the world to preach the Good News. Fr John disbanded the "parish" community under St Barbara until next year. We drove into town, had one last meal, and departed. The first "Group of Twelve" expedition had been completed, and a first for Canadian Orthodoxy had been achieved. As we parted from the group, we felt as if we were missing a part of ourselves. I will always remember this event as I continue on my ascent to Christ. The Lord did not let his disciples stay on Mt Tabor, but had something better prepared for them. I have no idea what this next thing

is for me, but it will be quite amazing if it tops my experience with the Group of Twelve.



*This year's Group of Twelve.*

### **How to be part of the Group of Twelve**

An experience like this will challenge you mentally, physically, and spiritually. But what you gain from taking the plunge will be greater than you can even imagine. If you want a challenge, to enjoy nature, and to grow in Christ, then you may want to consider applying for next year's trek, which will explore Theopany and will consist of back-country canoeing and backpacking. More information will be out on <http://www.groupoftwelve.org/> or email [all-saints@shaw.ca](mailto:all-saints@shaw.ca)

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## **Ottawa, Montréal young people have another get-together**

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On Saturday, 14 April 2006, young people from parishes in Montréal and the Annunciation Cathedral in Ottawa

gathered for another retreat, following upon one held earlier, in August 2005, at the Iversens' farm in the Montréal area.



Among the leaders and helpers for the day were Archpriest John Jillions, Rector of the cathedral, and his wife, Presbytera Denise; Archpriest Cyprian Hutcheon; Prof John Hadjinicolaou; Sasha Lopoukhine; Kosta Stavrianeas; and Vicky Grillas.

The group is standing in the courtyard at the side of the new Annunciation Cathedral temple. Note the very large new icon of the Theotokos in the background. It replaces the statue of the Holy Virgin Mary, a shrine site of long devotion to the Mother of God in the neighbourhood.