

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



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

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Baptism and creation : Second 'Group of Twelve' studies Theophany

On August 1, 2007, on the first day of the Dormition Fast, a group of young adults arrived in Wells Gray National Park to begin the second in a series of twelve annual outdoor adventures. The "Group of Twelve," led by Fr John Hainsworth, is an event involving (at most) twelve Orthodox Christian young adults who spend a week in the wilderness, living together and exploring (at least) five wonderful sources of Divine Revelation: one of the Twelve Great Feasts, the Scriptures, Creation, Liturgy, and Life in Community. Last year, the Group of Twelve climbed to the summit of Battle Mountain and studied the Feast of the Transfiguration. The focus of this year (2007) was to study the Feast of Theophany while hiking and canoeing in the backwoods and backwaters of God's creation.



" . . . that we may present the whole earth to God as a holy and unblemished offering."

Our original plan

The night before we were to begin our trek, this year's participants, eight in total, met at Clearwater Lake campground. Fr John reviewed the icons that had been brought, and it appeared that a number of them were of St Nicholas who, fittingly, is the patron saint of sailors. From that moment, our little "parish" of eight was under the protection of St Nicholas.

The route we had charted on the topographical map required us to charter a water taxi, which would deposit us at the north end of Clearwater Lake. Our plan was to hike approximately thirteen kilometres along overgrown

trails, over hills and valleys, through bear country, until we reached the southern shore of Hobson Lake, where the canoes we had rented would be waiting. The goal was to make camp the first night on the shore of Hobson Lake. The next morning we would strike out in our canoes and explore the lake to find a suitable campsite for the rest of the week. From this home base, we would make short day trips every morning and would conduct seminars in the evening on the topic of the Theophany. On the second-to-last day, we would hike back to Clearwater Lake and meet our water taxi, and then we would spend the next morning having breakfast in the town of Clearwater and saying our goodbyes.

But here is what really happened

The hike to Hobson Lake, which according to the signs at the trailhead was to have taken five hours, took us fourteen hours to complete. Contrary to best-laid plans, we were not able to complete the trek in one day and as such, had to make emergency camp on the first night in the middle of the forest. The land was rough and unkind; it bruised us with fallen logs and lashed us with thorns; its contours taxed our endurance to the limit. The trail led us through gorgeous old growth forest, up steep inclines, across wild meadow patches and finally, to the banks of Licksillet Creek. The creek's bridge had been washed out years earlier

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and we had no choice but to forge across the glacial creek with full packs on our backs.

By the end of that first day we had been on the trail for ten hours and many of us were, physically at least, ready to go home. The weakest among us received support, encouragement, and help from the others, but all eight of us had to give 100% of our energy and prayers to make it through the day. As Fr John put it, "Last year's hike was a cakewalk compared to this." The caravan was buoyed up by prayers and spirited singing on the trails until, at last, we found a "campsite" in the middle of the forest. To make camp, we split into groups charged with purifying water, or hanging food out of bears' reach, or digging a fire pit, all of which had to be done before dark fell. That first evening we pitched our tents in the foliage and tried to ignore the many roots and twigs lying underneath our bedding, upon which we promptly collapsed. We slept fitfully, all the while dreaming of bears' breaking into the 300 pounds of food and cookware we had hung from a nearby tree. There were no seminars that evening.

The next day

With the sun shining through the trees, we awoke to a beautiful morning and enjoyed our breakfast. We broke camp, reattached packs to our backs, and continued hiking. Within an hour we reached the outskirts of "the burn," an area of forest devastated by forest fire years earlier. We moved through a pastiche of blackened logs and gorgeous purple meadow flowers while in the distance a thunder and lightening storm rumbled. By the time we cleared the burn, many of us had started to wonder if Hobson Lake even existed. Nevertheless, a few short hours later, the rear of the pack heard the gladsome cry, "Lake!" from the front. We quickly located, untied, loaded, and boarded the canoes, and set off across the turquoise lake in search of a home for the rest of the week. After about twenty minutes of paddling (such a relief to paddle! ah, happiness!), we landed at a sandy outcropping with much rejoicing.

We started to set up tents, clear for a fire pit, and dig our "toilet" when one of us discovered that her tent had fallen off her pack somewhere on the trail. Sleeping arrangements were then shuffled, and the "boys" and "girls" tents became cozy as we packed ourselves in like

sardines. The remains of the day were spent lounging around on the beach, cooking and consuming dinner, and conducting the first seminar around a glowing fire in the twilight. We heard a reading from Bulgakov's *Friend of the Bridegroom* and discussed the ministry of St John the Baptist.

The day after that

The goal of day three was to scout out a location for our chapel and to build an altar. We discovered, conveniently, that directly across the lake from our campsite was another small section of white beach. We paddled over and discovered that this piece of beach was the perfect size for our "parish" of eight, so we immediately started the process of building the chapel, using materials we had scavenged from

the beach and surrounding areas : stones, logs, rope and a small bit of duct tape. These were used to create the liturgical items necessary : a cross, which we mounted into the sand, an altar, and a censer. Upon our completion of the chapel, Fr John led us in the service of the blessing of the waters. We then headed out onto the lake to canoe its boundaries and explore the creation that was, for that week, ours alone.



Annika Eriksson of Edmonton in the forefront as the group treks through rough country.

The seminars that day covered the Orthodox understanding of baptism as taught in the Scriptures and revealed in the liturgical practices and texts of the early church. The symbolism of water, of course, was talked about continually as the symbol of the new birth into the new man, Jesus Christ. Basking in the glory of the lake, we sensed the power of water as a life-giving, binding metaphor.

The Day of the Lord

While the Sunday morning sun crept towards the crest of the mountain, eight well-rested and excited travellers paddled across the lake to begin the Divine Liturgy. At the moment the words "Blessed is our God" were proclaimed, the sun rose from behind the mountains, casting the shadow of the hand-built cross upon the altar. The service was, to put it mildly, achingly beautiful.

After the Liturgy and breakfast, five of our party set out to complete a day hike on a neighbouring

mountain, while the remaining three spent the morning on the lake. A few short hours later, a thunder and lightning storm swept down the mountain pass and across the lake. The party at camp secured the belongings, kept everything as dry as possible, and retreated into the tents to wait out the storm, praying for safe passage for the hikers. The appointed time of return for the five came and went, with no sign of them. Two people headed off down the lake in search, while one stayed at camp to get a fire going with what remained of our wet wood. Eventually, the five arrived back at camp, wet, hungry, frightened, and a few so cold that they were bordering on hypothermia. Soup was cooked, dry clothes passed around, and the five found warmth in their sleeping bags. Soon, stories emerged of the intense trials that they had faced while on the mountain : swamps, hail, signs of bears close by, panic. Through the telling of these stories, it became even clearer to us all that the Lord was watching over us each moment to ensure our safety, declare His presence, and increase our faith. There were no seminars that night. We slept well.

The day that was second last

The following morning we broke camp, packed up our belongings, and paddled across the lake to our chapel for the final time. We sang the akathist “Glory to God for All Things,” a series of hymns that magnify the presence of God in all creation and all events. Given the events of the past week, the timeliness of this service was clear to us all. At the close of the service, we dismantled the chapel, leaving only the cross standing as a beacon to future travellers. We headed back to the end of Hobson Lake to tie up the canoes and commence the gruelling hike back to Clearwater Lake.

Going back was, surprisingly, much easier than coming in. We reasoned that this was because we now knew to avoid the snares of Devil’s Claw; because we knew now of the best method of climbing over the large obstacles in our path; and because now the trail we had beaten was so clearly visible. By the time night fell, we had gained Licksillet Creek, and we made camp on the other side in the midst of a wild blueberry patch. Fear of bears was high as there had been no campfire smoke to deter them and, as we soon realized from the droppings, we had made camp in the middle of a bear’s “snack bar”!

The day that was the last

The night, however, passed without incident. Morning dawned and we readdressed the trail to complete the final stretch leading back to civilization. The hike went rather smoothly, and we greeted the shores of Clearwater Lake with joy! We collapsed on the beach, had our lunch, and began our seminars while waiting for the water taxi.

The seminars that day were dedicated to the practical meaning of baptism in our contemporary lives. We discussed the problem of how to maintain our baptismal identity in a culture that works to reshape us in conformity with its secular patterns. We talked about the difficulties of life in the baptismal community, which we had certainly experienced throughout the trials of the week. We wrapped up our discussion by talking about life in the world as baptized persons, and the need for us to form a baptismal cosmology through which we see the world as a sacramental gift. We concluded that this cosmology requires us to be good

stewards of the environment, but not for the sake of conservation itself. Rather, stewardship is part of our liturgical task as priests of God, that we may present the whole earth to God as a holy and unblemished offering.

Throughout the course of the day, we carried with us what Fr Schmemmann once called “a bright sadness.” Despite all that we had been through – the physical pain, the extreme weather, the fear, and the cold nights – we were all, in a sense, feeling more alive and joyous than ever, yet mourning the end of this glorious trip. We spent that night camped in the Clearwater Lake campground, staying up late, drinking hot chocolate, talking, and doing our best to make the most of the last precious hours of the last night.

The following morning we drove into the town of Clearwater for a huge breakfast and, afterwards, said our final goodbyes. With sad but full hearts we got into our cars and headed back to the lives we had all left behind a week before. We had gone to the wilderness to experience the creation of God, and we had come back having been baptized in it, never to be the same. — *Matthew Davidson (All Saints, Victoria BC) and Muryn Jordan (St Herman’s Langley BC)*



Megan Tokaruk of Regina fords a stream.