



# WILDERNESS *and* FAITH

Future Covenant pastors explore the Christian calling to creation care.

PHILIP J. ANDERSON

**I**t is late May. Our intrepid group of voyageurs from North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago is battling its way into strong headwinds down the border lakes of Mountain and Moose in the Boundary Waters in northeastern Minnesota. Yesterday—our first day on the water—was unusually warm for this time of year, and though the bugs had hatched and were a thick nuisance, our spirits were high. Today is different. It is about 40 degrees and it has rained steadily and hard all day. We still have miles to go before finding a sheltered campsite for the night.

My canoe partner has never been in the wilderness on big lakes in seemingly small canoes, carrying heavy Duluth packs over portages. In the days before we launched our canoes in Little John Lake, it became evident that she was nervous, even frightened of the unknown experiences awaiting us and uncertain whether she could do it. But yesterday her canoeing skills and con-

fidence soared. And today, despite the challenges of the weather, she is paddling and pulling her weight with the rest of us.

Late in the day we arrive at a less-than-desirable campsite, but it will have to do. Our group sets about erecting tents, starting a fire, getting a rain tarp suspended between trees, and brewing the coffee. I look around and wonder where my canoe partner is. Worried, I begin to search and soon find her lying on her back on our beached canoe in the rain, arms outstretched and singing. Now more relieved, I ask her if she is all right. Looking at me with a broad smile, she replies, “I have never been more at peace in my life.”

Students are drawn for several reasons to the “Wilderness and Faith” course that Jim Bruckner and I teach, and are required to follow an application process in order to be accepted (see the writing assignment in the sidebar on page 9). Many have had a variety of wilderness experiences and want to ex-

plore in depth the relationship of their Christian faith to their love of nature. Others have never been in a canoe or camped in wilderness settings, perhaps having lived primarily in urban or suburban areas. Some have been committed to and involved in a host of stewardship and ecology issues for some time, acquiring significant practical and technical expertise, and desire further opportunities to deepen their knowledge and experience.

Whatever backgrounds they have brought to the course, all have been motivated in one way or another by issues of Christian responsibility and discipleship in caring for the environment upon which the human and non-human creation in present and future generations depends. And as graduate students in theology preparing for ministry, all are academically serious and capable as well.

Because Jim and I have been limited by United States Forest Service regulations to selecting only six or at the



most seven students, we have had the “luxury” of putting together a group each year based not only on the quality of their application essays but on a balance of gender, race or ethnicity, and degrees of wilderness experience, which ranges from plenty to none at all. It means that over the course of eleven days, living and working closely together, the chemistry of our group is something to which we give a lot of thought. Preference has always been given to students completing their studies at the seminary, so they are mature, proven leaders, and a joy to be with. We are also spared largely from the stress that often accompanies planning and guiding such wilderness expeditions, as those in youth ministry, for example, can appreciate. We are with colleagues and peers in ministry. And though we generally know most of the students quite well, by the end of the experience bonds have been deepened in new and memorable ways.

We first offered this course in 1998,



and this May’s class marks the tenth anniversary of the seventy-two students who have accompanied us into the wilderness—what Calvin called “the theater of God’s glory.” In all

**Wilderness is a place of desolation, crisis, and testing; it can even kill you. It is also a place of provision, discovery, and redemption, where one can hear and be formed by God.**

but one of the years we have explored the lakes, rivers, and portages of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW). The exception was in 2005 when together with ten students we rafted and paddled 130 miles of the wild and sparsely visited Chitina River in Alaska, nestled along our winding

way by several of North America’s tallest peaks.

The idea for a course (which as far as Jim and I can tell is unique in North American theological education) that would explore the idea and reality of wilderness from biblical, theological, historical, ethical, stewardship, and conservation perspectives had been in my mind since I first began teaching at North Park Seminary almost thirty years ago. A native Minnesotan, I had

spent much time since the age of two along the wild and rocky shores of Lake Superior, left by receding glaciers 10,000 years ago. It is the largest body in area of fresh water in the

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world (holding about 10 percent of its volume, still potable in most places); only Lake Baikal in Russia holds more water in its deep volcanic basin—now tragically and irreversibly made toxic by industrial waste. I had also made many canoe trips in the Boundary Waters since my teenage years. Somehow I wanted to share the experience of this glorious and unique land with others, while also doing the hard academic and spiritual work of theological education and personal formation.

Two elements in particular impeded

velop the course and come to share magnificent experiences through the years. That person is Jim Bruckner, who joined our faculty in 1995. Having grown up in Alaska in a Covenant missionary family, he shares a passionate love of wilderness and has brought crucial wisdom and experience as well. Within the broad design of the course, our mutual academic disciplines of history/theology and biblical studies have complemented one another well in a team-taught course.

We divide our time into two seg-

(it can still be cold in May!) fellowship room for class. If nature calls while we are discussing it—well, the church outhouse is just a few steps outside! We are thankful for the congregation’s generous hospitality.

What do we seek to accomplish in these focused discussions together? Quite simply we desire to take the biblical witness to the Creator and the creation seriously with our students and apply it to an understanding that is theologically reflective, historically informed concerning human experience over time and its relation to the natural world, and ethically sensitive to Christian responsibility in discipleship and stewardship. We explore the challenges of a growing global ecological crisis in population growth, climate change, hunger, biodiversity, clean water, air quality, human-generated waste, energy consumption and sources, and a variety of land issues in order to establish a nuanced context for the importance of our conversation together.

Through essays, lectures, and discussions we consider the concept of wilderness as an idea as well as a reality, that it has not only a physical and geographic landscape but also dimensions that are emotional, psychological, and spiritual. Wilderness is a place of desolation, crisis, and testing; it can even kill you. It is also a place of provision, discovery, and redemption, where one can hear and be formed by God. These two attitudes toward wilderness are centrally present throughout Scripture, and we work extensively with these passages.

Moreover, the Bible makes clear the Creator’s relationship with the land and all its creatures, at times even showing preference for creation when it is subjected to human abuse. Creation is an ordered place, pronounced to be good; it is the garden and temple of the Lord and an intricate web of his design; it is an enduring sign of God’s victory over chaos and a witness to the promise of a future time when all things will be made new. In Scripture we hear the two distinct voices of creation. The first de-



The 2002 Wilderness and Faith class, clockwise from bottom left: Denise Anderson, Steve Hoden, Jim Bruckner, Matt Dyment, Joel Oyoumick, Phil Anderson, Cynthia Stewart, and Millie MacKinnon

the implementation of such a course for several years. First was the desire to accommodate our “seminary on wheels” (as David Nyvall once referred to the meetings of Mission Friends—our Covenant forebears) in our family’s cabin on Lake Superior’s north shore, near the small village of Hovland, about twenty-two miles from the Canadian border. In 1984 I began a twenty-year project of renovating a Norwegian immigrant fisherman’s homestead, built in 1915 and abandoned in the late 1920s, and it took time to get it to the point where we could accommodate eight or nine people with “The Lake” out our front window and the BWCAW in our backyard.

The second and more important component was finding the teaching colleague with whom I could de-

ments. During the first half of the course we are based in Hovland pursuing intensive seminar discussions during the day and exploring the wilderness environments, such as the roaring Brule River, after the day’s work is done. Though we generally leave Chicago only three days after the end of the spring term and commencement exercises, students will have already completed reading the anthology of essays that Jim and I have compiled and tweak a bit each year, focusing on Scripture, theology, history, and ethics. Some are still catching up and read during the eleven-hour drive north. We hold our morning and afternoon sessions in the beautiful and rustic Trinity Lutheran Church, just two miles up the road from our cabin, using its sanctuary for morning worship and its unheated

clares the glory of God—is the glory of God—in its unending witness of praise (see Psalm 8, 19, 104, and 148). Creation also groans in its lament under the burden of human sin (see Romans 8:19-22). God hears both voices, and rejoices and grieves.

Among the many issues we wrestle with are the theological and ethical implications of biblical texts. In his now famous 1967 essay “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” historian Lynn White laid responsibility foremost on an industrial and technological society that had lost the natural God-given interrelatedness and interdependence of the human and non-human creation. By misapplying “dominion” language in Genesis, humans had come to exploit by intention and thoughtlessness the limited resources of nature. We explore the meanings of good and bad dominion language, seeing that the intent of the Genesis account is one of stewardship, of being entrusted with tilling and caring for the earth. White believed that the “theocentric” (God-centered) heart of Judeo-Christian faith had collapsed into an “anthropocentric” (human-centered) self-interest. He proposed that

St. Francis be made the patron saint of ecology, which indeed he has become in the Roman Catholic Church. The debate that this sparked four decades ago continues to be a provocative thesis to launch a substantive discussion.

This is merely a sampling of the issues, ideas, texts, and writers we consider. We benefit from the theological insights of Joseph Sittler whose understanding of the cosmic redemption of Christ places grace at the center of ecological concern, that it is ultimately a matter of evangelism. We read the wonderful sermon by Elizabeth Achtemeier, “God the Music Lover.” We listen to John Cobb on “Christian Existence in a World of Limits,” and James Nash who argues that Christian love is that which motivates and requires us to be good and faithful stewards. And so much more—John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Sigurd Olson, Wendell Berry. The physical setting of our course is an ideal laboratory both for our structured discussion and our wilderness experience. The Boundary Waters is not only the most used wilderness system in the United States, its history since at least the late nineteenth century represents the most embattled



wilderness as well.

We also have opportunity to experience other aspects of the Hovland community, including the neighboring reservation of the Grand Portage band of the Ojibwe people. This also deepens an appreciation of the history of the country we will be paddling and portaging as we enter the Boundary Waters, and the interaction of native peoples with the French voyageurs and the white entrepreneurs of the international fur trade.

In most years our students have enjoyed a visit to Adventurous Christians/Covenant Wilderness Center on the Gunflint Trail, north of Grand Marais, a vital camping ministry of Covenant Pines Bible Camp. In addition, we have usually spent an afternoon with our neighbor Bruce Larson, who has taught

## ASSIGNMENT: Why Wilderness?

Students applying for the Wilderness and Faith class are asked to reflect on the following quotations and write an essay, in 750 words or less, on the question: “Why wilderness?”

■ “Nature, the world, has no value, no interest for Christians. The Christian thinks only of himself and the salvation of his soul.” (Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 1841)

■ “Perhaps the greatest disaster of human history is one that happened to or within religion: that is, the conceptual division between the holy and the world, the excerpting of the Creator from the creation.” (Wendell Berry, *A Continuous Harmony*, 1972)

■ “A wrong attitude towards nature implies, somewhere, a wrong attitude towards God, and the consequence is

an inevitable doom.” (Dorothy L. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos*, 1948)

■ “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.” (John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, 1911)

■ “All ethics rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts.” (Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 1949)

■ “This skillful ordering of the universe is for us a sort of mirror in which we can contemplate God, who is otherwise invisible.” (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1536)

■ “Who, finally, is my neighbor, the companion whom I have been commanded to love as myself? He is the near one and the far one, the one removed from me by distances in space and time . . . the

unborn generations who will bear the consequences of our failures, future persons for whom we are administering the entrusted wealth of nature and other common gifts. He is man and he is angel and he is animal and inorganic being, all that participates in being.” (H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, 1956)

■ “If in piety the church says, ‘The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof’ (Ps. 24:1), and in fact is no different in thought and action from the general community, who will be drawn by her word and worship to ‘come and see’ that her work or salvation has any meaning? Witness in saying is irony and bitterness if there be no witness in doing.” (Joseph Sittler, “Evangelism and the Care of the Earth,” 1973) □

bio-chemistry at the University of Illinois for more than fifty-five years. As a person of faith, he tells us how he became a leading advocate within government for the creation and preservation of public parks in the cities and towns of Illinois, natural places for families and children often with limited resources and opportunities. He reminds us that while it is natural to feel overwhelmed by so many of the environmental needs and challenges locally and globally, if one is committed to even one thing and does it well, over the decades it does make a difference.

The second half of the course is when we experience the glory of wilderness, the long days and miles of paddling and portaging. We have had warm and sunny days as well as long

stretches of cold and relentless rain; times when the black flies and mosquitoes are omnivorous; extended periods of remaining wind-bound for up to two days on the larger lakes. We discover that we must rely on each other and share the load and responsibilities. We process informally what we have been learning with our canoe partners, along the portages, during breaks and meals, through long evening hours around the fire (unless there is a fire ban because of drought), and even the quiet conversation in tents as sleep overtakes our tired bodies. We worship at the beginning and end of each day, and there is plenty of opportunity for solitude, meditation, and journaling. Our senses and powers of observation become honed once again to what surrounds us.

The one remaining requirement upon returning home to Chicago is writing a reflective essay that pulls together and integrates, in whatever form the student wishes, all that has been learned and experienced, and what difference it will make in life and ministry. These wonderful, creative, and often moving papers have been a testimony both to the high quality of our students at North Park and also their giftedness and integrity as persons of faith.

Perhaps you, the reader, will want to turn to the assignment in the sidebar and write your own essay on the question “Why wilderness?” Jim and I would be honored as together we all consider our shared calling as Christians to care for and love God’s good creation. □

## STUDENT Reflections



### Phil Cannon

After our experience in the wilderness of Alaska, I was called to serve a church in Anchorage and found myself living in an urban setting, yet close to truly wild places. The experience has impacted my ministry at First Covenant a great deal.

I had been exposed to the Christian faith as a young person, but I cannot remember a time when I was taught anything about our human relationships with the rest of creation. I remember being taught to love God first, others second, and yourself third. And that was it. The earth and its creatures were not even mentioned. Yet Genesis 1 reminds

us that the very first humans were put into intentional, loving relationships with everything around them.

In my work at First Covenant, I decided to integrate some “wild” experiences into our programming. After some trial and error, we now essentially hold a mobile youth ministry during the summer. Once a week we meet early in the day to go for a hike—sometimes to a lake, sometimes to a mountaintop, and sometimes to no particular destination at all. Along the way, we take a break and worship together, most often through the study of the Scriptures.

There is something about being surrounded by God’s creation (and little of our own) that heightens our senses and calls us into worship. We read a paper in our seminary class that examined Psalm 148, concluding that it is a call to worship for the whole of creation. The supposition is that we are not the only things on this planet capable of offering praises to God. In fact, by fulfilling the purposes for which God designed us (and this is true of every creaturely thing), we bear witness to the greatness of God and his

amazing designs—thus our offering of praise. When we pause for a moment in a natural setting and turn our hearts to God, we can sense that there is already a song of praise taking place. The proper response is simply to join the chorus. □

Phil Cannon is youth pastor at First Evangelical Covenant Church in Anchorage.



### Sarah Eix

We entered the wilderness as city-conditioned voyageurs prepared to tread portages once used by the Native Americans and Canadian fur traders who navigated these quiet waters. Instead of streetlights



and billboards, white pines and birches towered; at night, sirens and traffic were replaced by the calls of the loon and the howl of a wolf. And, like Old Testament Israel, we experienced the wilderness as a place where God speaks and forms communities.

Each of us entered the wilderness eager to try on new ideas. Each of us recalls different highlights: the miraculous birth of a dragonfly, an otter making his way indifferently across the bay, the nutty taste of a fiddlehead fern, a single-file walk down a moss-carpeted path, the center aisle of nature’s cathedral, a starlit sky sliding into the great expanse of water, the vivid and brilliant greens of a rain-soaked forest, the moments that we treasured unspoiled nature, and the moments that we felt especially anonymous.

The wilderness offered us space to contemplate the complexity of creation and the majestic and sovereign God who ordained it. It invited us to listen: Jim glides up in his canoe from a fishing venture, and we hear the aluminum frame beach on the rocks. From across the lake an owl calls back. Waves slap against the shore and seem to laugh a little, the trees whisper, and for a moment the purr of a partridge can easily be mistaken for a three-horsepower motor. As the sun sets, we sit on the rocks listening to the playful warble of birds we can’t see. The loons join in with their calls to one another across the lake—and then, just as night seems to have comfortably settled in, they begin to cackle. Some call it the “witching hour.” The sound escalates, becomes fuller, and then wanes, but with it all life is quiet. It is as if the loons silence creation for the evening.

In moments like this we hear God, subtly convicted that God’s call to hear always includes an invitation to respond. Will we care for our world with a goodness and grace that reflects God’s redemptive intent? God alone will lift the curse; he has begun that work in Jesus. One day he will make all things new. Until then he entrusts us with his world. This kind of hope compels action; it does not excuse complacency. As

Christians we bring an important voice to the environmental discussion when we can articulate and authentically live an ethic that links eschatological hope with stewardship. Our creator God has given us a voice unique in all creation—that we might sing his praises and witness to his grace. □

**Sarah Eix lives in Manistee, Michigan, where she attends Faith Covenant Church.**



### **Benchuan Gong**

One of the most important Chinese philosophical understandings about the relationship between human beings and nature is that heaven, earth, and human beings should become one. This oneness is believed to be a harmonious state where all things work together in a perfect way. The two-week course in the Boundary Waters was an experience of this oneness. Having lived in big cities like Beijing and Chicago for twenty years, I had had almost no time or occasion to notice the existence and beauty of the sun, moon, stars, trees, and wildlife.

One evening we sat on a huge rock by the lake in silence as we watched the sun disappear beneath the trees and the sky turn to red and then yellow and eventually blue. Two mallard ducks were swimming in the water, making me feel peaceful and contented. This feeling became even stronger when from one of our canoes on the lake came the music of a hymn. When I meditate on God’s mighty work in creation, this perfect picture of the oneness of creation often comes to mind. God is the author of the creation, and God is the author of the

harmony of oneness.

After that experience, I dreamed of having a piece of land that I could touch, of growing things and making myself part of nature. A friend offered me an opportunity to plant vegetables in his garden. I planted the seeds, watered the plants, and harvested the cucumbers and tomatoes when the time came. Working in the garden became a joy because I could feel God’s presence and be fully engaged in and part of nature and its creator. Now I own this garden in the city, and it has become for me a place of prayer and praise. □

**Benchuan Gong lives in Chicago where he attends Immanuel Evangelical Covenant Church.**



### **Ingrid Johnson**

I am grateful for many things about the Wilderness and Faith trip but especially for companions with whom to celebrate the gift of life and wrestle with the meaning of being a creature in a good creation, although tainted and polluted by the brokenness of sin. Even surrounded by the (relatively) unspoiled wild splendor of the North Woods, I am burdened by an ecologist’s understanding of how severely, if accidentally, implicated we all are in the problem of environmental degradation, and how much suffering, human and otherwise, results from our inability or unwillingness to be good stewards.

Love of power and striving to fill spiritual voids with material accumulation lead to reckless waste. I grieve the relentless destruction of the earth by humans

who have turned God's good provision into a privately owned disposable commodity and dumping grounds. I fear for what past and present carelessness will mean for today's children and their ability to grow up healthy and have children of their own.

My hope and my faith rest in the story of a loving God who is working through creation, incarnation, and resurrection toward the eventual restoration of all things. I believe that in the meantime we are to witness to a saving faith of abundant life by recognizing in deed as well as word that how we use the gifts of creation reflects on our commitment to God's glory and our neighbor's good. Concern for the health of the earth has been an integral part of me since childhood, and in recent years I have come to understand this as my vocation—the pastoral and prophetic work of restoring gratitude, awe, stewardship, and love of all God's creatures to a central place in Christian formation.

This trip helped me come to a deeper understanding of how to go about the ministry of creation care. It also gave me much-needed refreshment after two challenging, draining years of academia and urban life. And perhaps most importantly, it helped restore my awareness of my true identity and the source of my life and sustenance. In wilderness as nowhere else I have a strong sense of the mystery, miracle, and gift of being a child of God. □

**Ingrid Johnson is a student at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago.**

### **Ekaterina Kozlova**

In a way, the Wilderness and Faith class is like the Touch Gallery in the Art Institute of Chicago. The latter helps visitors enrich their understanding of art through tactile interaction with it. The former deepens participants' understanding of the Creator through firsthand, intimate interaction with creation.

For me the class dovetailed with my own reflections on the theme of God's face. According to the psalms, we are in

dizzying and inescapable proximity to God (Psalm 139:7-12). We are immersed in God's breath and drinking life from it (Genesis 2:7; Acts 17:28). Entering the Boundary Waters, I was looking forward to seeing God's face.

Our entry into the wilderness was marked by rain. That Sunday afternoon it seemed treacherously omnipresent—above us, against us, around and beneath us, biting our cheeks and obscuring our view, slowing down canoes and forcing us to paddle harder.

Old Testament scholar Terence Fretheim writes, "No human history is independent of the history of nature." Preceding not only our advent into the universe, but also our transition into eternity, non-human creation provides a certain bracketing of our existence. Gathered, divided, and commissioned in Genesis 1 "to bring forth," water witnessed our birth in Genesis 2. Echoing the imagery of the Garden of Eden, it reappears in Revelation 22. Within this frame, our life is sustained through water, as the psalmist prays, "You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it... You water its furrows... softening it with showers, and blessing its growth" (Psalm 65:9-10).

The primary focus of the Art Museum's Touch Gallery, incidentally, is on the human face. Visitors, through the pores of their skin, are educated on its form, expression, texture, and even temperature. Wilderness and Faith, for me,



focused on the divine face. Water (rain, lakes, waterfalls) in its exhibitionistic

proximity, its omnipresence, was there to be constantly beheld and tactilely experienced. The Boundary Waters truly showed me God's face. □

**Ekaterina Kozlova is a student at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago.**



### **Carolyn Poterek**

It's been three and a half years since I took the Wilderness and Faith course, and I still find myself reflecting on the implications of what I learned. As a youth pastor, I try to bring my students on trips and hikes where they can encounter God in numerous wilderness landscapes. I often find myself praying with and for my students as we explore the wonders of God's creation. Together we have prayed that we will hear the Lord's voice and see God's majesty in new ways—ways that will guide us in the important role that we play as stewards who have been granted responsibility over creation (Psalm 8). I pray that my students will become leaders who seek justice as they care for both the earth's resources and God's people.

My everyday life choices reflect the way I am caring for creation, our society, and our world. As we reflect on sustainability in today's changing world, we must ask ourselves how we will be stewards in the midst of the evolving practices of our society. As people of God, we have been given the gift of creation, which comes with great responsibility. How will we steward, and what

path of dominion over creation we will choose? □

**Carolyn Poterek is youth pastor at Trinity Covenant Church in Salem, Oregon.**



### **Adam Rohler**

I once had a philosophy professor tell our class that mountains are inherently beautiful. Being from Nebraska, I quickly raised my hand and said, “I am a prairie person. What if I think cornfields and big skies are beautiful, but I look at a mountain and all I see is a big hunk of rock?” My professor looked at me and said flat-out, “You’d be wrong.”

I was stunned.

Didn’t he understand my personal preference for certain parts of creation and not others? Wasn’t beauty simply in the eye of the beholder? Who was he to tell me what was aesthetically pleasing and what wasn’t?

I have since come to learn that mountains are indeed beautiful, not just because they are mountains, but even more because they proclaim the glory of our creator God. They are divine sculptures. Of course, that truth applies not just to mountains, but to prairies, oceans, deserts, lakes, rivers, and forests as well. All are beautiful. Their beauty, however, lies not just in something that pleases the eye, quickens the heart, or invokes a gasp of breath; there is a deeper, richer, thicker, beauty.

When we are out in creation, we are dwarfed by mountains, shaded by tall trees. We are small specks in an eagle’s eye. In our arrogance, we want to be larger, we want to dominate, we want

to master all that we survey. But it is not about us. (This is what my college professor was trying to teach me—that my definitions in life did not trump all others!) Rather, creation is deeply interconnected. It relies on mutual relationships. There is no seeking of autonomy, for to do so would equal death.

Standing in the Boundary Waters looking out over a lake, swatting mosquitoes, and watching fish jump, I suddenly realized that I was not looking at extraordinary individual creations; I was experiencing an extraordinary community of life. Before me was a model for living, each piece doing its own part, all participating in the flourishing of the whole. Before me was a model for the body of Christ, the church. It suddenly made sense to me why Jesus was driven into the wilderness before his ministry began and why the people of Israel had to wander in it for forty years. The wilderness is a place where one hears the voice of God, but it is also a place that invites you to a deeper, richer, and thicker understanding of community. The wilderness teaches by its very existence that which faith keeps trying to tell us over and over again: “your best life now” happens only when you seek it with your neighbor. Or, to steal a line from my Southern Baptist friend, it isn’t about you, it’s about y’all. □

**Adam Rohler is co-pastor of Bethesda Covenant Church in New York City.**



### **Josh Rude**

I awoke as the sunlight illuminated our tent that Monday morning. As I got dressed and began to exit through the zippered door, a classmate informed me that it was 4:30 in the morning. As far

as I could tell, it could just as well have been noon. We were in the land of eternal sunlight. I paused, climbed back into my sleeping bag, and attempted to go back to sleep—with my shirt covering my eyes.

It was our first day on the Chitina River in Alaska where our Wilderness and Faith class was set to journey together, both as we traveled 130 miles down river, and as we discussed how we as people of faith (and soon-to-be pastors) understood our role in creation. I thought about what activist and conservationist Aldo Leopold highlighted when he wrote about the interconnectedness of all things. As caretakers of and participants in creation, our actions have implications for all things, and we depend upon creation.

Within this participation, God is revealed. Whether we were paddling, eating a meal, hiking, or sitting next to a fire, creation poured forth speech proclaiming the glory of God (Psalm 19). It was a clear opportunity for us to gain a greater understanding of who God is, and who we are called to be.

I was troubled recently as I read an article in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* titled “No Time for Nature.” Though the article’s focus on our present shift away from the land is not news, it is a sad reminder of our lack of understanding and willingness to participate in the world around us. Forgetting the land means forgetting the stories of God’s provision during the Israelites’ wilderness wanderings. It means forgetting the still, small voice Elijah heard. It means forgetting Christ’s own wilderness experiences.

Now that I work in Covenant camping, I can see daily the impact that creation has, not only on the staff, my family, and me, but also on every guest that comes to our camp. It is appropriate to use the word “retreat” to define the time spent at Covenant Pines because it is an opportunity to be still and to listen to God’s voice speaking to us. It is living Psalm 19 every day. It is once again participation with all of creation. □

**Josh Rude is director of Covenant Pines Bible Camp in McGregor, Minnesota.**