



I Wonder As I Wander

Five Pilgrimage Walks for Advent

Learning@Redeemer invites all to share the journey of Advent in a series of weekly meditative walks. The themes of the walks will follow the themes of the four candles of the Advent wreath: hope, peace, joy, and love, respectively, and finally, the Christ candle.

A focus for meditation from a member of our community, based on the text of an Advent hymn, forms the basis of the pilgrimage. You are invited to follow the suggested route, on your own time, either in person if you can do that safely, or as reflection from your home.

This week's walk has been prepared by Paul Pynkoski.

Church of the Redeemer

Advent Icons

So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near...

Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come...

Therefore, keep awake...

And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake...

(Mark 13)

Comfort, comfort ye my people;

Speak ye peace, thus says your God.

Comfort those who sit in darkness

Bowed beneath oppression's load...

Hark! The herald's voice is calling

In the desert far and near

Calling us to new repentance

Since the reign of God is near...

(Comfort, Comfort Ye My People. Hymn 100, "Common Praise")

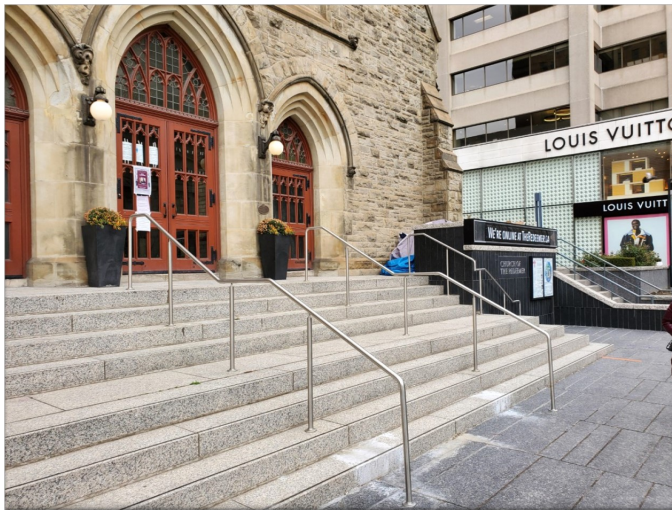
The Pilgrimage Walk Begins...

We stand on the north east corner of Avenue Road and Bloor Street West.

We begin our walk by first looking to the southwest, and see the Royal Ontario Museum, an icon of history and culture.



We begin by walking east on Bloor...



and as your gaze passes the edge of the church steps your eyes fasten on Louis Vuitton, an icon of high fashion.

Next, as we walk east along Bloor Street, is Tiffany & Co., another fashion icon with its distinctive pale blue background, burnished doors, and twenty feet of glass, inviting those who can afford it into a holiday festival of lights.





We walk a little further, and on the south side of Bloor Street the diamond encrusted watches of Cartier beckon.

Gucci follows on the north.



Continuing east, we reach Bay Street, and the green emblem of one of Canada's largest banks confronts us.



The icons and symbols of our consumer culture are so ubiquitous that we are often unable to see them for what they are.

“Keep awake!” cries Mark, “he is near.” “A herald’s voice (is)... calling in the desert,” sings our hymnwriter. “Comfort those who sit in darkness bowed beneath oppression’s load.”

We continue south on Bay Street. Shoppers, as much as COVID-19 will allow, move through the stores of the Manulife Centre; they leave Birks and snake north through the underground concourse towards Eataty, Holt Renfrew, BMO, and more high-end retailers.

But we continue south, and as we reach St. Mary Street and St. Joseph Street, the crush of people and buildings thin, and turning west onto St. Joseph Street we enter the campus of the University of Saint Michael's College. Playful wooden animal sculptures adorn the park on the north west corner.

There is a large church just past the sculptures, and the nearby buildings begin to have the look of a cloister. Instead of being carried by the crowd of shoppers you can actually stop for a moment, have space to breathe.



You think, as you read the gospel passage, “What’s all this about keeping awake, that he is near? What about repentance and God’s reign?”

We continue walking east. Almost at Queen's Park...we stop outside the Kelly Library, home to the Nouwen archives and the illuminated manuscripts of the Pontifical Institute. Outside the library stands one of Toronto's most intriguing sculptures. Two brass reliefs forming a reality that draws us back to both Mark and our hymnwriter. We can stop here for a moment and reflect.

What do we see?

The first relief, facing north onto St. Joseph Street, depicts a large crowd. In the middle we see people who are fearful, grasping, crying out. On the right are some hippies. They look at one another, but are oblivious to what is going on around them. On the left, men in suits and briefcases go about their business. They are serious. They are walking towards Bay St., headed to the banking houses. They, too, do not see the frightened, grasping crowd; a not looking that seems almost intentional.



The south facing relief ushers us into another world. No grasping, no crying out, no looking the other way. No. Here, Gandhi speaks with Etienne Gilson; Socrates, Schweitzer, and Aquinas are engaged in conversation. Ordinary people listen in. It is peaceful; here is dialogue and communion.

It is a reality those on the north side do not see and cannot enter into. Yet these two realities exist side by side...



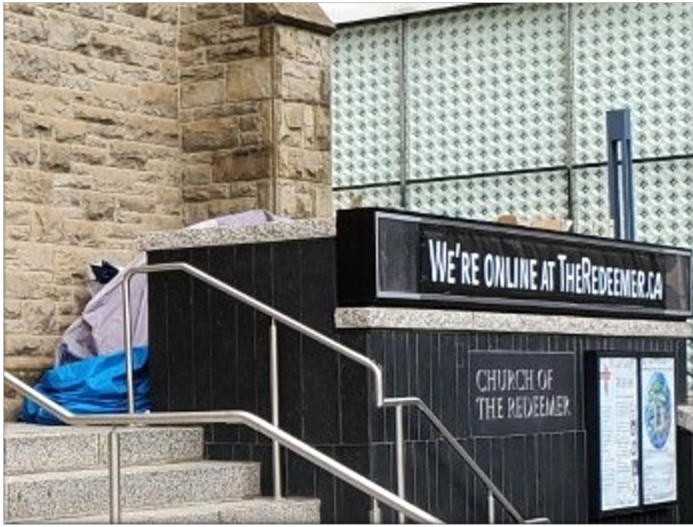
We cross the street, cutting through the courtyard on the north side of St. Joseph's. Several paths converge on a marvelous sculpture that somehow captures and reflects light from every angle. Stop. Once again take time to breathe, for who would dare walk past the glory of the Archangel Michael? Angels inhabit our Christian stories, appearing to Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, Jesus, Peter, Ananias; they come as strangers to the hospitable, and announce the coming of the kingdom in the Apocalypse.

What message might this angel may have for us?



We continue through this quiet courtyard and emerge into the traffic of Queens Park, and, following the curve of the sidewalk to the north, head back towards Bloor Street. Perhaps the angel calls us to reflect on things seen and, more importantly, things not seen.

Do we, this Advent, have eyes to see and ears to hear? Will we, captured by the glitzy images of our culture, miss the icon of Christ in the suffering and oppressed? Are we like the self-absorbed hippies or the determined men of business in library sculpture who are oblivious to the reality of anxious suffering in front of their noses?



We arrive back at Redeemer.

When we took that first glance east along Bloor Street towards Louis Vuitton and Cartier, did we see the caps of the grey tents tucked into the corner of Redeemer's steps? They are the tiny quarters of homeless Christs who daily line up for a warm meal, a washroom, and clean socks at our Common Table.

They are the opposite of the images of the gods of our culture. They are icons of

Christ, heralds of the kingdom, "calling us to new repentance." Like that second library sculpture, they invite us to imagine a world where everyone has a place and a voice, a world that is both here and not here. A world that requires the audacity of our hope to become a reality.

Be awake. Be the comfort. Break the yoke of oppression. Be the light. This is what Christ calls us to in Advent.