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Advent Devotional "Darkness"

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Advent Devotional
The First Sunday of Advent
November 28, 2004
Isaiah 9:2
Darkness

Our small group obediently turned off our flashlights and plunged with our surroundings into absolute blackness. We were not far beneath the earth's surface, but we were deep enough in Sanders Cave to encounter that sensation familiar to anyone who has experienced absolute darkness. In the years following that initial foray into spelunking, I visited other caves. On a 1955 trip west, our family visited Carlsbad Caverns. My mother read an October, 1956 *National Geographic* story about archaeological discoveries at Russell Cave, in my native Alabama's northeast corner, so we traveled there the next year. And over half my younger son Andrew's lifetime ago, we toured Blanchard Springs Caverns in the Arkansas Ozarks. Though I had been a Scout during my first cave experience, I discovered myself unprepared for each successive one.

I've had my share of the usual experiences with darkness, most as simple as the earth's rhythmic daily and seasonal cycles: moonless pre-dawn field and stream ventures with my father; walks or gym-opening trips for morning exercise in pre-dawn darkness; images projected onto the wall of a room-sized *camera obscura* or emerging on negatives in a darkroom. Despite these experiences, it's remained the province of caves to really teach me about darkness.

Darkness personifies one of our most basic human fears. Ronnie's favorite psychologist, Dr. Phil, is fond of saying that "monsters live in the dark." The recent

movie "Monsters, Inc." toyed with that profound reality in humorous but telling ways, and reminded me that when darkness deprives us of sight, we conjure up monsters. Caves taught me that our monsters are only manifestations, not reality. In Sanders Cave, I first encountered claustrophobia. I now know that the darkness elicited an uncommon reaction, for normally that isn't one of my particular phobias. Cave-induced darkness was like being buried alive. Thinking back over my experiences of the past half-century, I realize that, as it did to characters in the stories told in "The English Patient" and in Tony Hillerman's most recent book, darkness brought to me twin fears: abandonment and death.

Caves taught me that humans are meant to see light, and that no matter how dark it may be, light is usually hard to escape. Star-gazing reveals just how light even the darkest night can be, and the implications of the term "light pollution." Our routine world, where light waxes and wanes, often lulls us into forgetting God's goodness in creating a world that we would enjoy, where light gives color as well as warmth and life. And that, for the most part, the world He created is a world of greater and lesser lights, not of light interspersed with darkness.

Finally, caves taught me that darkness neither destroys nor obviates life. My first caves were "dead" ones: Sanders and Carlsbad were neither more nor less than holes in the ground. But even in Carlsbad's deadness there was life, for bats had made it their home. Blanchard Springs Caverns, on the other hand, remains a "live" cave. Amidst the blackness are the slight sounds and smells and even feel of life. That cave is still changing, slowly remaking itself into a similar but

different entity. Even in the darkness there is life, change, and hope.

Advent begins in darkness. It is a time of physical separation from light as days shorten and darkness seems everywhere to advance. It is a time of anticipation and longing. It is a time of facing fears and woes. But, as caves have taught me, it is not a time without hope. On the contrary, it is a time that can be filled with the promise and reality of Light and life. As incongruent as our secular and spiritual calendars may seem as we travel from Thanksgiving to Christmas—from thanksgiving to the reason for that thanksgiving—caves have taught me that it is a more natural progression than appearance would suggest. More natural, that is, as long as there is faith.

Ray Granada