

While a scout leader many years ago, one of our day trips from camp was to go spelunking, to crawl into an opening in the ground and wander around a cave. I misuse the word "wander" when I should really use the terms slither and squeeze our way from one chamber to the next. There was more than one spot where I got stuck and thought I'd never get out.

Yet, getting stuck wasn't the worst part. The worst part was when we all turned off our headlamps and were immediately immersed in total darkness – darker than the darkest, moonless night; darker than any closet I'd hidden in as a kid; so dark you could almost **FEEL** your life slipping away from you.

Today, I'd relate that experience in the cave to what sin does to us, what our turning away from God does to us. A feeling of helplessness; of knowing I'm alive but dying at the same time; a total loneliness when knowing others are just inches away from me; an abandonment from God. Hopelessly lost in the darkness of one's soul.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

What a wonderful lead-in to the coming season of Lent, a mere four and a half weeks away. That season when we are to take a closer look at ourselves; to take inventory of our lives; to seek to correct those issues that disconnect us from family, and from God.

But we shouldn't have to WAIT for a particular time of year to repent, because our family, our GOD, is ALWAYS near at hand to us, and in today's world of global connectedness that nearness may be just a few presses away on our cellular devices. Yet, if we can't connect with family, how can we possibly expect to connect with God.

Maybe like those who were in the region of Zebulon and Naphtali, a land filled with hate and distrust, which had been devastated by the Assyrians over 700 years before Jesus came to start his ministry

there, a great light came to destroy that darkness of hate and death by letting folks know of the mercy and love God has for them. Matthew, in his gospel, tells **US** that **THAT LIGHT** is Jesus, as he fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah. And Jesus isn't preaching about a kingdom that is far off, either in time or distance, but is right there in front of the people **NOW!** "The kingdom of heaven **is at hand**". Reach out and touch it, grasp it, hold onto it, take it close to yourself, it is here. **God is with us**, the Christmas proclamation, we need just open our eyes and our hearts.

Throughout Jesus' ministry, which starts in Capernaum, he sheds light on the writings of the prophets, the words God spoke thru the prophets to His chosen people. Jesus' preaching illumines the hearts of the poor, the lonely, the downtrodden, the forgotten, with the light of hope, that God is **nearer** to them than they had ever known.

And that **same God** is nearer to us today, if we just turn our lives back to Him and away from the darkness of selfishness and ingratitude. To rekindle the light of Jesus' **REAL** presence among us you'll soon be hearing a lot about the Eucharistic Revival starting up in parishes across our Nation. As Catholics go, only about 3 in 10 believe that the Holy Eucharist, which we receive at every Mass, is **TRULY** the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ. These are truly dark times for the Church instituted by Christ. This is a good time for His light to shine more brightly in a world crawling deeper toward the darkness, a light to guide us up from the abyss.

Back at the cave, when we were told to turn our headlamps back on I had only one thought in mind – to get out of that cave as quickly as I could. I won't tell you that I gave up all my bad habits and turned my life over to God at that moment, but I will say that I experienced a death, a darkness so life threatening I would never want to experience again. Being in the light is a better place to be, and having the guiding and protective light of Jesus Christ in one's heart is better still.