

We are already at the third Sunday of Advent and so far I have deliberately tried to emphasize the darkness of the season. Darkness is part of the character of Advent. We wear darker vestments. We use dark colored candles. The readings emphasize being alert and being shaken awake and an awareness of our sins. Dark territory. This would fit well with the meditation on the three figures of Advent which I introduced last week. That meditation was written by the German priest Father Alfred Delp while he was in a Nazi prison in Berlin in December 1944. He wrote that he gained a new appreciation for the second figure of Advent as he paced the confines of his prison cell facing an uncertain future; he was executed for treason against the Nazis two months later. I was going to quote Fr Delp to introduce our second Advent guide, but as I was praying another image came into mind.

In JRR Tolkien's conclusion to the Lord of the Rings trilogy, The Return of the King, the two hobbits, Frodo and Samwise, are deep in the depths of the evil land of Mordor. Frodo was exhausted and barely able to carry the One Ring which he had to destroy in order to prevent darkness from covering all of Middle Earth. Sam had begun to realize that neither of them were likely to escape with their lives. The only light was an unholy light created by the fires of the orcs and the tower of the dark lord Sauron's evil eye. Tolkien wrote this about what happened next: "Sam crawled from the hiding-place and looked out. Far above the mountains in the West the night-sky was still dim and pale. There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark peak high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty forever beyond its reach... Now, for a moment, his own fate, and even his master's, ceased to trouble him. He crawled back into the brambles and laid down by Frodo's side, and putting away all fear he cast himself into a deep untroubled sleep.*"

One little star twinkling in the darkness filled Sam with hope during his dangerous and seemingly hopeless journey. The Bible is full of darkness and what seems like an ever-increasing cycle of sin. But where sin increased, God responded with an increase in grace. In the Old Testament the good news was often veiled and difficult to see. It isn't until the New Testament that the light truly begins to shine and it begins to shine with the arrival of our second Advent figure: the archangel Gabriel. Angels are messengers from God. When God has an extremely important message to announce, he sends an archangel. No message

was more important than the one Gabriel began to unveil. Gabriel's three annunciations (to Zechariah, Mary, and Joseph) were blazing supernovas in the darkness of salvation history. All three annunciations told the recipients that God was about to fulfil the promise he made when he told Adam and Eve that he was going to send someone to crush the head of the serpent who had led them into the darkness of sin and death.

Gabriel will make his first liturgical appearance on Wednesday, visit us for a couple days, disappear, and then return on Christmas. His message of hope that the son of God has arrived is always with us and will forever be beyond the reach of darkness and terror. Having heard that message proclaimed, we are called, first, to believe it and then to follow in Gabriel's footsteps and, in the words of Fr Delp, be "announcing messengers" as well. While humans are not angels and never will be angels—despite what Hollywood would have us believe (sorry Clarence from *It's a Wonderful Life*)--we can be messengers. We can be messengers of comfort like the angel who visited Jesus in Gethsemane after he said, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; still, not my but your will be done" (Luke 22:44). We can be messengers of encouragement like Gabriel when he visited Joseph in a dream and told him not to be afraid; that it was okay to take Mary as his wife (Matthew 1:20). Sometimes we need to be messengers of "tough love" like Gabriel's rebuke of Zechariah for his disbelief (Luke 1:19-20). Or we can simply be messengers of the gospel itself, clearly stating God's plan and that nothing is impossible for him, just as Gabriel did for Mary (Luke 1:26-38).

There are many people who need such messengers. How are we going to respond to Gabriel's invitation to join him in bringing light into this part of our Advent journey?

St Gabriel the Archangel, pray for us

*Tolkien, J.R.R. (2001). *The Return of the King: Being the Third Part of The Lord of the Rings*. Barnes and Noble Kindle Edition.

Delp, Alfred (2006). *Advent of the Heart*. Ignatius Press.