Reading from Amos today, my mind turns to thoughts of darkness. Have you ever experienced darkness so complete that it becomes almost tangible? One summer when I was home from college, I went spelunking with my sister, Cassie, and my two friends, Matt and Charles. There’s this cave, near Lick Creek in the Little Belt Mountains, south of Great Falls. It’s not marked on any map, and there are no signs or directions. To get there, you have to know where you’re going, or know someone who does. I was the only one of us four who ever had been there, but it’d only been once as a kid, so even after getting directions from my Dad before we left, we still had to stop and get help from a local rancher.

When you get to Lick Creek Cave, there isn’t much to see; just a hole in the ground with a rope. You climb about 30 feet down this narrow hole, mostly on a ladder with slippery and missing rungs, but the last 8 feet or so is by rope. Then you immediately have to slide on your belly in the mud through this tight little crevice, only about 18 inches high. The cave goes back what seems like forever, but in reality is probably not much more than a quarter of a mile, most of it spent on hands and knees. One of the features of this cave is the Bottomless Pit. It isn’t actually bottomless, of course, but with only the light of a headlamp to see by, it sure looks like it. Once you crawl around the Bottomless Pit, you’re most of the way to the end of the cave, the Big Room.

The Big Room is just what it sounds like: a cavern, 500 feet across, an enormous open space that suddenly appears at the end of this tight, short, scramble under the earth. Beneath the ceiling of this cavern, which is maybe 100 or so feet up, the room is filled by a pile of fallen rock. Having come to the Big Room, Cassie and Matt and Charles and I decided to climb this pile of rock—pile of boulders, really—and sit and eat our provisions. I don’t remember exactly why we decided to climb to the top; maybe it was for the view.

Inside this cave, if you turn off your flashlight, the dark isn’t just black, it is solid. You’re as completely blind as if you had your head in a sack. No light seeps in from the surface, and you can’t see your own hand inches in front of your nose. And because the room is so large, most flashlights aren’t powerful enough to see across to the opposite walls. Even with all our lamps on, we were in an island of light amid a sea of solid and impenetrable darkness.

Now, we made it to the top of the pile just fine; all we had to do was keep going up. But because the darkness was so thick, and the path through the boulders so winding, going down was a different story. There was 360 degrees of down, but only one heading would bring us to the exit of the Big Room. We started picking our way down the boulders, but we got turned around. Soon, we weren’t going down anymore, but up again. We decided that we must have found another pile, and do we decided to summit it and hopefully get our bearings. When we made it to the top, we found the remnants of our lunching spot. We’d made one giant circle.

So we started down again, determined this time to hold a straight line in the direction we remembered coming up to begin with. Once again, the uneven ground and the misleading dark brought us back again to our picnic area. Now, by this time, we were beginning to get frightened. We had no way of knowing for sure how to get out other than our memories, and those had already failed us twice. We sat and collected ourselves and began to consider how we were going to find the bottom of this pile of rock, and how we were going to find the exit to this room.

Most of us don’t know darkness like this. It’s darn near impossible to find a place so dark and so silent as inside the belly of the earth. Our world is filled with streetlamps and lightbulbs and LEDs and computer screens, and even when it isn’t, the moon and even the faintest light of the stars keep us from being completely enveloped in darkness. Even the deceptive shadows of a forest in starlight give some point of reference; in the cave, there was nothing.

We are so used to being able to see with such clarity that those moments and those ways in which we can’t see are disorienting, disturbing, even panic-inducing. Beloveds, we are living in times which are, please forgive the cliché, unprecedented. Never before has our generation been in this particular situation, this confluence of pandemic and contentious election and climate change and such loud and sustained public protest against injustice. Any one of these things by itself would be enough to confound us, but all of them together… in a way, we are all collectively sitting in that cave in Montana, huddled around the picnic spot for the third time, or the thirtieth time, trying to figure out what to do next.

In that moment, I had to fight down panic. Each of us wished dearly for some answer, some sign. If only, we said, we had thought to bring some candles or glow sticks, and to leave one burning by the entrance to the room. If only we had brought a string and left a trail up the rock pile. If only we had been prepared for this. But how could we have? How could we have known this was what we’d face, where we’d end up? And how could we have known, Beloveds? How could you or I know that, in November of 2020, we’d be worshiping from our homes and avoiding our friends? How could we have known that we’d still be waiting on the results of the Presidential election? How could have known that it would become imperative for us to state the obvious, that Black lives really do matter?

Is it any wonder that we are starting to panic now, Children of God? It is that panic that is creeping into our lives, our relationships, our civic engagements and starting to turn us against one another. Is it any wonder that, lost in such a present and threatening dark we begin fighting amongst ourselves like we did in on that mass of rock in the Big Room?

But the hard truth, my Beloveds, is that fighting amongst ourselves won’t get us out of here. It’s tempting to point to the faults and failures of others, but Amos reminds us today that we all share some of the responsibility for ending up where we are. Whether it is fair or not, whether we deserve it or not, we’re stuck here, in the dark, and nothing can change that. The darkness of that cave was a judgement on Matt and Charles and Cassie and I. Not a punishment, not a condemnation, but a moment which revealed to us a certain truth: we were not prepared. We had successfully fumbled our way into the cave, but blind groping wasn’t going to get us out of it.

What Amos and Jesus both want us to hear, Beloveds, is that the day of the LORD is coming, whether we are ready or not. Justice is coming. Healing is coming. The moment of clarity is coming. That’s good news; but it is also a wake-up call. We need to be ready, because, like exploring the cave, we know we want to see those things but we may not fully realize what they mean.

With all that is uncertain, there is one thing we know: we know that God is God, and that we are God’s people, God’s children. We know that God’s love will not leave us stranded in this Big Room, huddled atop this pile of boulders. We know that God has a vision for the wholeness of creation and the healing of humanity that, though it may be delayed, cannot be held back. The bridegroom is coming, even if we don’t know when. This thick darkness is no obstacle to God; for in the beginning everything was darkness, and the Spirit of God moved over the darkness, and God spoke light into being. That’s what I mean when I say that we know that God is God; we know that God will keep doing what God has always done: bringing life, doing justice, and loving creation into being.

Matt and Charles and Cassie and I made it out of that room, and we made it out by working together, by trusting one another, making a plan, and sticking to it. We hadn’t prepared coming in, but we had to prepare now for how we were going to get out. We decided that if our problem was not being able to walk a straight line, we’d leap-frog down the pile. We still knew which way we’d originally come up, so one of us stood there looking out, and the next went down the pile to another point in line with our destination. So on and so on, we worked our way down the mound, bit by bit, all the while helping one another keep the line straight. And, lo and behold, when we finally reached the bottom, there was the tunnel entrance waiting for us.

We made it out that day, Children of God, but you can bet that next time I go down in that cave, I am going to bring along some damned glowsticks. Now that I know what I need to be prepared, I’ll be ready next time. As we wait with hopeful expectation for the Day of the LORD, I wonder what we will need to be ready. I wonder what kind of oil we should be putting in our flasks. I may not have any solid answers, but I know who does, who’s been to this cave before and knows what we’ll need when we get there. What was the oil that sustained Jesus through his trials? What was it that allowed him to walk off a crucifixion? What was it that guided him in every moment of his time among us? I suspect that’s the oil we’re looking for. As we plan ahead for that great and terrible Day of the LORD, it’s good to know that we’re not planning alone.