Witness to the Light

An Advent Study with the Prophets

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Witness to the Light provides a wealth of resources for group study and worship for the Advent season. To enhance your use of this book, digital resources, including images to display during worship services, a Spotify playlist, and session introduction videos from the author, are available at **www.wjkbooks.com/Witness.**

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INTRODUCTION

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation;
neither shall they learn war any more.
O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD!

—Isaiah 2:3–5

The weight of the world is heavy these days. To spare us all a litany of gloom and doom—which would likely be updated, modified, and freshly awful by this time tomorrow—I invite us all instead to take a moment and reflect on what is feeling

particularly heavy in this present moment. What issues are weighing on your heart? What worries for your family or your future are keeping you up at night? And more broadly speaking: Who is suffering in your community today? Where is the world aching from violence or disaster? Where do you witness the rich and powerful reaching for more, adding to the burden of the oppressed? Can you hear the voices of those on the margins, calling out for justice?

What is making you weary these days? Is there an empty place that's aching for healing or new life?

Now, holding all of that weariness together, hear the invitation that rings out from the desert: *Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!*

It is true that we face unique challenges in our time and place. But it is also true that God's people have journeyed before through seeming darkness, unknown territory, wilderness places, and "unprecedented" times. The best hope that we have right now is that their faith has illuminated a path that we can still follow.

With the Advent season upon us, it can be tempting to rush to the gospel texts surrounding the birth of Jesus. Those familiar stories are comforting, maybe even nostalgic. But while jumping to the joy of Christmas Day may provide a bit of comfort and joy, they may also tempt us toward escapism. A manger scene alone won't cure what ails us this time. What's more, skipping ahead to the big birthday moment will deprive us of the richness and depth that are the true gifts of this season.

We need voices from the wilderness to quench thirsty souls—to remind us that Advent hope meets

us in barren places, like water in the desert or light on the horizon after a long, weary night. That hope also meets us in illuminating darkness, where we might be better able to see that slow, rising glimmer of dawn. Prophetic voices cry out: "Walk in the light!" "The days are coming!" "Rejoice!" and "Prepare the way of the Lord!" The call comes from women and men, from Exodus to the exile; from major prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah to the minor prophets; and even from those who don't have books of the Bible named for them but who speak prophetic truth all the same, like Miriam and Mary.

With this book, for the four weeks of Advent, we will watch for the light that the prophets tell us is coming. Voices from the Old and New Testaments will guide us through traditional themes of revelation, calls for justice and righteousness, unlikely joy, and ultimately returning home to a place of rest and restoration. These age-old themes ring true as ever, as we navigate a time of upheaval, uncertainty, and lightning-speed progress that (somehow) doesn't feel like progress at all.

In the face of some of the more daunting challenges of our time, we often feel like we are flying blind to navigate the world faithfully—or walking in the dark, as it were, to find a hopeful path for the future. After all, what could the ancient prophets possibly know about climate change? About mass media culture and the impact of rampant misinformation that comes with the technological age? About the rapid evolution of AI and the anxious uncertainty it casts on aspects of the future?

Jeremiah could not possibly understand the confounding nature of our healthcare system. When

Isaiah said, "Beat your swords into plowshares," he could probably not have imagined a world in which assault rifles are considered common household items, or a country that boasts more guns than people. And I find it unlikely that Amos, for all his insistence on economic justice, could have fathomed the vast chasm that exists now between the top 0.1 percent and the bottom 5 percent of wealth in our economy.

These may sound like vague and wildly unrelated concerns, but they all point to some common truth: the world, as we humans have built it, is unsustainable. We know, in our heart of hearts, that the "never enough" energy of late-stage capitalism is destroying the earth, straining our families and communities, and possibly eating at our very souls. Not necessarily in that order.

Are any of these specters causing you to lose sleep at night? Making the days feel heavy and the nights so vast and dark? If so, friends, you are not alone. You are so, so not alone.

But neither are we isolated in this span of history; in many ways, our current struggles are not unique to the present moment. Though so many of our challenges feel brand-new and cutting-edge, the prophets who first witnessed to the light of God's transforming love are still speaking to and for us today. They speak urgent truth to unjust power, and they speak hope to pressing issues of our time—many of which are, in fact, timeless.

Could it be that the light we seek is already here? It is our call and our joy to bear witness to its coming, in its many varied expressions. This will not be a linear, narrative journey to Bethlehem, as

we so often expect for the season. This year, we will examine the season of waiting and hopeful preparation through four themes of the biblical narrative: *Reveal. Renew. Rejoice. Return.*

We'll meet some modern-day prophets along the way too—from Amanda Gorman to Tyler Childers—whose timely words and wisdom help us prepare the way and stoke the holy imagination that faith requires of us.

What a gift that, even under the weight of the world–and the staggering pace of the news cycle—we can breathe in the truth of these ancient texts, and let them breathe new life into us as well. Things may seem dark, but the stories of our faith, from creation itself to the resurrection, remind us that the darkness is often there to cast the light into sharp relief, and ultimately to reveal the way, the truth, and the light.

FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

Reveal

What's your favorite end-of-the-world movie? Dystopian novel? Postapocalyptic drama series? There are many variations within the genre to choose from: fire, flood, or famine; pestilence, pandemic, or the paranormal; or of course, there's the "fall of civilization through human-caused disaster" scenario . . . classic. Given the vast range of apocalyptic fiction available these days, it's safe to say that the entertainment industry has tapped a vein of popular interest bordering on cultural obsession. These stories must speak to something deep within our spirit that longs to see how our current reality might spin itself out, how it might all go down—literally.

Of course, we'd never choose to live through any of these disastrous realities in real life. In fact, many have already witnessed or survived them (particularly the pandemic and natural disaster

scenarios). But in the literary sense, apocalyptic stories are all the rage. From books to the big screen, end times are trending. We humans love to explore what "The End" might look like: as long as we are exploring in ways that feel wildly fictitious.

After all, there's something almost comforting about watching the world end on the screen or reading about civilizational collapse in a book that you picked up from the library. On the page or on TV, it is *pretend*—it is happening to fictional people in made-up communities. There's usually a hero you can count on to salvage some vestige of humanity, and when you've had enough trauma, just turn it off or close the book and go settle in for a good night's sleep (only mildly interrupted by bizarre dreams, if you're lucky). These stories open a little escape hatch in our brain from the doom of the day. They say, "Look. The worst has already happened . . . and here's how redemption might still be possible after." We crave that story for the resolution it provides, whether we realize it or not.

In the very early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was on a work trip in Nashville and thinking that I may go home a day early because "this new virus thing" was starting to sound serious. I went to dinner with my brother, who lives in town, and he said, "Do you know what two books I can't stop thinking about right now?" Without missing a beat I answered, "*The Stand* and *Station Eleven*."

My reply was not in the form of a question. Both of those novels were top of mind for me as well. Two stories of different genres, written decades apart, each exploring societal collapse and its aftermath in a major pandemic. Stephen King's *The*

Stand takes a supernatural, even biblical approach to that after-world vision. The main characters who survive "Captain Trips" (otherwise known as "the superflu") are guided by spiritual forces: one evil, in the figure of Randall Flagg, and the other good. Mother Abigail, a Moses-like character, leads the survivors through the wilderness to whatever new world they might build next. She's guided by dreams and visions, and her followers have all been led to her by dreams as well.

Station Eleven author Emily St. John Mandel skips the spiritual themes and focuses instead on a band of traveling actors and musicians, keeping the arts alive in a new, almost tribal reality as survivors of the disastrous "Georgia Flu" form new communities.

After my brother marveled for a moment that I'd read his mind, we discussed the likelihood of lockdown, as folks on the news were just starting to discuss, and how long it might last. A few weeks maybe? A month?

The next day, my conference ended early and I went home. I didn't see my brother (or much of anyone else) for over a year.

Years after the pandemic, themes of societal, economic, and ecological collapse remain top of mind, and fictional stories on those themes are still hitting awfully close to home. You'd think folks wouldn't want their entertainment to so closely mirror the worst possible outcomes of current events, yet we can't deny the cathartic effects of end-times storytelling. At its best, the genre invites us to explore what kind of world we might build for ourselves if the old were to fall away.

One of the most impactful books I've read in recent years is Brian McLaren's *Life after Doom: Wisdom and Courage for a World Falling Apart*. It's not apocalyptic fiction, but something far more unsettling: *apocalyptic reality*. Long a trusted voice in progressive Christian circles, McLaren dives into some of the biggest stumbling blocks facing civilization today and reckons with the failure of current systems—particularly religious and political systems—to meet the challenges of our time. Early in the book he explores four possible "collapse" scenarios that could be the fallout. Weighing factors like climate change, widespread violence, and a precarious economy, he does not flinch from the possible outcomes of each scenario, including and up to the complete extinction of humanity. It makes for some heavy and heady reading. Come to think of it, that sounds a lot like some biblical prophets we know.

In particular, McLaren points to a world that we were taught to believe in, one he claims doesn't exist any more—a world "with no environmental limits," "where infinite economic growth is possible," "stable institutions always solve our biggest problems," and in which "the arc of history bends toward ease and plenty." If we are awake and paying attention, we know that version of the present is false. McLaren says that recognizing the fallacy of that story "may be a gift that nobody was asking for, but it is a gift nonetheless." As he goes on to reflect, "When we look at the world without those glasses, the invisible hand of the market no longer looks like the hand of God. Our civilization no longer looks collapse proof. Our species no longer looks extinction proof."[1]

Whereas apocalyptic fiction offers an escape—kind of vicarious redemption where the heroine rebuilds a just and thriving world out of the ashes—McLaren offers a real-time revelation. This is actually the most elemental meaning of the word "apocalypse"—not world-ending destruction, but revelation. The book embodies a truly prophetic *revealing* of how deeply broken our world is, and how insufficient our institutions (including those that are faith-based) are to mend it. He insists that we must "learn to see" our present reality in new and more honest ways. But in the naming of what's been lost, and what further devastations might come, a deeply faithful and persistent hope resides in the seeing and naming. After all, reality that has been revealed and made known can be faced, possibly even transformed.

Biblical themes of upheaval, cosmic reordering, and divine revelation occur frequently in the Old Testament, particularly in the prophetic texts. Yet modern Western Christendom tends to associate "revelation" more with the biblical end-times vision of the book of Revelation, aka the Apocalypse of St. John. But as we know from lived experience, an apocalypse doesn't necessarily mean the end of the world. It can be a smaller moment of destruction that reveals an urgent truth—not for all time, but for the present time.

What if the truest "revelation" is not finally the end of the world, but the end of the world as we know it? Witness, GenX, to the gospel of R.E.M. The "as we know it"[2] caveat holds the whole world. What if every moment of seeming "apocalypse" was not the big, scary end of the world, but just the

end of the world as it has been, as is familiar and comfortable in its brokenness?

The original music video for the R.E.M. song (circa 1987) featured a boy sifting through the remains of his home following a hurricane. An apocalyptic event, to be sure, but not the end of the whole world—just the known world for that family and community. It was the end for all who survived the storm. But like so many survivors, they would begin again.

As we live through seasons of crumbling infrastructure, rapidly changing social landscapes, or personal crises, we again find hope in the words of the prophets and the vision they cast for what might come after the old fades or breaks away. We might even begin to see something hopeful in the crumbling itself. Some things very much need to be broken, allowed to die, or burned to the ground and rebuilt from scratch. Once we fix our minds on hopeful destruction, we may realize that what first seems like the end of the world is often just the end . . . as we know it.

A Future Hope Revealed

Long before the book of Revelation was a glimmer in the eye of St. John, the prophets cast revelatory visions to guide God's people through tumultuous landscapes, seasons of seismic destruction, and catastrophic exiles. The prophets did not flinch from the truth of disastrous times, but always held to the light of God's hope, shimmering on the horizon.

Jesus often references the ancient prophets in his own preaching and teaching. Traditionally in church

this time of year, we read certain texts of messianic prophecy. While their themes of wilderness wandering and awaiting new life are certainly Advent-appropriate, it is easy to get caught up in whether these prophets were "predicting" the birth of Christ, or were they talking with greater urgency about a savior who might arrive for their people, in their immediate timeline? What might be more helpful is to notice the ways in which the prophets deeply informed the ministry of Jesus himself. Witness: Some moments in Jesus's life and ministry when the voices of the prophets echoed through his own.

> "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."
>
> Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."
>
> —Luke 21:25–33

In the 1800s, a wave of Italian immigrants moved to America and found that the harsh climate of the Northeast was not hospitable to their beloved fig trees. So they took an unconventional approach: they started burying those trees in the ground. Since then, the practice has been passed down across new generations.

After the tree's leaves drop, but before the ground freezes in the fall, fig growers dig a two-foot trench in the ground, using electrical wire to bind the tree, and then they pull it down into the ground. They say you can hear the roots snap as the tree bends toward its shallow grave. By the time that tree is lying flat, only a few of its strongest roots remain connected to the earth.

Come spring, these Pennsylvania Italians unearth their trees, which easily pop back into place. By summer, those trees will bear abundant fruit that gives them a taste of home.[3]

In Luke 21, Jesus reaches for his own roots. Raised at the feet of rabbis, Jesus frequently uses prophetic language, themes, and imagery in his own teaching.

"Signs in the sun, moon, and stars" might be celestial miracles that we witness with wonder. We may wake ourselves at ungodly hours to go see a rare eclipse, or stay up late to catch the northern lights as they appear in unusually southern climes. But such events in Jesus's time were often considered terrifying harbingers of doom. *The sky is falling*—literally! Jesus's vision here points to small moments of death and resurrection that we can witness all around us, all the time: in passing seasons, in the movement of the skies, and in the rhythms of nature.

As God's redeeming work is enacted in the world, it is clear that "the entire cosmos will be disturbed, radically affecting human life everywhere."[4] This passage from Luke's Gospel relies heavily on language from many of the prophets, portraying the Son of Man's arrival as a day that will see the fulfillment of God's ancient purposes. Some of Jesus's primary allusions point to Isaiah 5:30 and 8:22, Ezekiel 32:7–8, and Joel 2:10. Imagery in this text also relates to "the Day of the Lord," which the prophets understood as a time when God would decisively intervene to redeem God's people (see Isa. 13:4–13 and Joel 2:28–32). Jesus also quotes Daniel 7:13, portraying the Son of Man arriving "in the clouds."[5] So the vision Jesus paints here is about much more than just a fig tree. It portrays his eventual return as divine revelation: a day of reckoning and salvation.[6]

The fig tree also echoes prophets like Jeremiah and Hosea, who used the image to signify judgment on Israel. Jesus's audience would have been well aware of the connection, recognizing a familiar theme that Jesus is drawing into their present-day reality.

While the ancient prophets looked ahead to the days of God's revealing judgment and fulfillment of ancient promises, they were likely not talking about Jesus specifically. Their visions were rooted in the more immediate salvation of Israel. We explore these themes during the Advent season not because the prophets were literally talking about Jesus, but because their visions of God's purpose made known is a timeless theme, particularly related to God's love revealed in the coming birth of Christ.

That Jesus so frequently referenced these themes in his own teaching makes the connection even more striking. These were the stories of his people, and throughout the Gospels we witness how Jesus made the familiar come alive again for them.

The parable of the fig tree does not seem so apocalyptic, in the narrative sense—especially compared to the dystopian fiction we immerse ourselves in today, or even compared to more sweeping "revelations" in Scripture. But what Jesus knew, like the prophets before him, is this: it would sure seem like the end for the fig tree and for those who witnessed its decay.

Sometimes the end of the world is just the end . . . as we know it.

Those Italian immigrants are planning for their future by embodying and retelling the past, reimagining it for a new day. That's what biblical prophets did too. It's what Jesus modeled, every time he retold, reimagined, and bore witness to the prophetic teachings of his own upbringing. He was pulling up something long buried, bringing it into the light, and waiting for its moment to be revealed. He was guiding people to rethink and reimagine what that ancient truth might look like for a new generation. All the while, he was planting something sacred in the ground to bear fruit for a distant season.

I would imagine that anyone watching those Italians pull the trees down to the ground, hearing those roots snap and pop with the strain, would think the trees were being destroyed. They would see only the living thing plunged into darkness, buried in a shallow grave. Little would those witnesses

know that the gardeners are just preserving both root and fruit to be resurrected for another day.

Awake and Waiting

Jesus references "this generation," which complicates our modern interpretations. End-times theologians are quick to point out that the end must be nigh! Jesus says so!

More than a few generations have come and gone since Jesus first told this tale, and in every generation, some have thought the world was ending with them. It's a good reminder that our human (and Western) timetables are not the same as biblical ones; nor is our time the same as God's time. The use of language like "this very night"[7] and "this generation" are narrative devices used to invoke urgency and watchfulness. Jesus wants us on our toes. The kingdom of heaven is here *now*. Be ready. Stay awake.

In every generation, followers of Jesus have been called to stay tuned in to the cries of those on the margins, and every generation of the faithful has met resistance from the forces of empire when it comes to lifting up those voices. The ones with power and privilege know that the revealing of broken systems will come at a cost for them, so they silence the voices of the prophets who tell the truth.

This kind of preaching and teaching ultimately cost Jesus his life. So we begin with the end in mind: we await the birth of Christ, in all the glittering magnificence of Christmas, while also knowing that the ways in which he lives will ultimately end his life on earth.

For those who witnessed his ministry and followed him, it would be the end of the world as they knew it. But of course, it was not truly the end.

The work of Advent is to live in active hope, revealing the same kind of truth that Jesus did: the truth of our own world in our own time. That way promises discomfort, conflict, and hard revelations. But the path is also rich with promise: images of water in the desert, signs and wonders shining in the heavens, and new pathways made known where there seemed only darkness.

Even the blessed birth that we await will bring its own kind of apocalypse—a rending of the heavens and a revealing of all that needs uncovering and reordering in the human realm. The shepherds knew as much when they looked, with awe and terror, at the angel choir descending to bring the news. The Magi knew it too, as they watched the skies for their own sign, in their own time, and began to wend their way through the darkness.

Herod knew. You better believe that Herod knew that the light of truth was being born into his kingdom. And he was rightly terrified. That kind of revelation is never good for the powerful.

This much has always been true: if you try to speak the truth to or about the powerful and the response is swift and furious, you probably hit a nerve. It's possible you even revealed a whole new kingdom, just waiting to be born.

Perhaps some modern (primarily American) followers of Jesus have unduly fixated on an end-times ethos because a literal "return of Christ" would fast-track us all to heaven, providing a tempting escape hatch from our troubled world.

Waiting around for a disastrous "end time" is way lower-stakes than the work of actual prophetic truth telling—the work to which we are called. We can witness and learn about that calling still, as prophetic truth-tellers work for racial, economic, and climate justice. Their words and work are not popular (same as it ever was), but they reveal what needs to be made known.

Every word from the prophet's mouth is a little apocalypse: a revelation that all is not well, that might is not right, and that a new day is coming. That's the kind of revelation that points us toward our greater story: the human story of God's kingdom come near, and revealed in our time.

If you're wondering where all the seasonal comfort and joy is going to come in, fear not! We'll get there. Many of the texts that we expect to read during the season of Advent emerged from a time when God's people were wandering through uncertainty, wilderness, and perceived darkness. The prophets spoke: challenging the people and calling them to account, while envisioning a day when God's truth would be revealed for all. Those same words speak to us today. While we wait, maybe we can string some lights on a fig tree?

Watch for signs in the sky. See what's there, and not what we wish was there. Speak the truth. The light is coming, and all will be revealed.

DAILY REFLECTIONS

Week 1, Day 1

> In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.
>
> —Genesis 1:1–5, NRSV

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.
>
> —John 1:1–5

It's the first day of Advent, which makes it the first day of the church year. While the secular calendar (and the market that sells myriad versions of it) wants to make a whole new person out of you come January 1, the rhythms of our faith story, our liturgy, and worshiping communities start right here.

In the beginning, in the first spark of everything, God separated the light from the darkness.

But notice that the Creative Force of the world did not banish the darkness entirely, or even name it as a thing to be feared or avoided. Darkness defines what has been illuminated. Here is the very foundation of life itself.

This first week of Advent, we are thinking about how something that seems like destruction—like the very end—can be a kind of beginning. We remember today that creation itself begins in darkness. That void of nothingness was the canvas, the blank page, where God drew breath and drew life—and it all started with extracting light from dark, giving a distinct name and purpose to each.

The whole rest of the creation story is about naming and defining the elements of life. God does not bring a single thing into existence that doesn't have a job.

In children's sermons (which are, of course, for the adults as well) I often ask the younger members of our church to think about how darkness can be good. We talk about things like having a fire outside at church camp (zero fun in the daytime), driving around to look at Christmas lights (they might be on all day, but are they cool to look at in the noon sun?), or watching the sky for shooting stars. Are there stars up there in the bright of the morning? Sure. But looking for any dazzling celestial display in the afternoon will usually be disappointing! The darkness is necessary for viewing the shimmering stars.

Photographers need a dark room to develop an image with clarity. Our human bodies need darkness to sleep well. And when you go the movie theater, what's the first thing that happens as the

opening credits start to roll, when you are finally (finally!) at the end of all the commercials and previews? The lights come down. The buzzing crowd goes instinctively quiet. A thrill of anticipation moves through the assembly.

The Gospel of John reflects back on that creative "in the beginning" moment in introducing John the Baptist—the desert prophet and cousin of Jesus who came to "prepare the way" for the one who would baptize not with water but the Spirit. Just as the darkness serves to provide distinction and clarity for the light, John would cast a defining vision for the one who was coming, and how those who wished to follow him in the light should clarify their own visions and make ready. He came to witness to the light: the same light that was with God, and was God's own self, from the very beginning.

The first word of creation was not absolute or completed in a few days' time. It was a beginning that held the potential for infinitely more beginnings. On this first day of Advent, we are poised at the edge of another blank page, another new beginning. In the days to come, how will we bear witness to the coming light, and to the darkness that always exists alongside it, serving to illuminate and clarify what is possible?

God of Creative Wonder, open our eyes to the miracles unfolding all around us. Give us the vision to see you at work in seeming darkness. May we walk boldly, hopefully, and creatively, watching and waiting for what will be revealed in our midst. Amen.

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