

Introduction

For much of my life, the shape and story of Christmas formed around readings from the four Gospels. And within the boundaries of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' arrival into the world, I pinned my most vivid Christmas imagination against Luke's Gospel. Like in a child's kaleidoscope, each year the colorful fragments from other Gospel readings may have come into view momentarily, but my overall faith perspective of the significance of Jesus' birth came into focus only at the reading of the second chapter of Luke.

Like many others of my generation, the existence and meager celebration of Advent in my church ensured that I did not notice it until I was in my twenties. Readings from the Prophets were uncommon in my church upbringing, and although I now know that some of my favorite Christmas hymn lyrics have a prophetic grounding, I had no idea of this in my early years. In my home church, we seemed to leap in worship from Thanksgiving to Christmas Eve, bypassing the elegant and essential bridge of Advent built on God's prophetic word. But since that time, I have discovered and grown close to the words of Isaiah and other prophets whom God called to speak truth and promise to God's people, even when they blatantly and destructively lived outside of their covenant with God.

So powerful in message and beauty, the words of God's prophets shine through the darkness of the people of their times as well as through our contemporary darkness that descends when we, God's people, continue to stray from covenantal faithfulness to God. To

approach Christmas only by way of the Advent Gospel readings will leave us ill-equipped to live in the post-Christmas world that is not all stars and angels, but is, in fact, rife with both destruction and possibility. Humanity cannot take Advent and God's coming among us to heart if we bypass the prophets. God's people struggled mightily with faithfulness and faithlessness. Their struggle and lack of discernment often brought dire and desperate consequences. Yet through the cacophony of pleas, arrogance, and wars, God's prophets spoke to the people of a redemptive future of joy, kindness, and peace—all made possible by God's steadfast love born into the world. When we allow God's prophets to speak a word to us, alongside those of the Gospel writers, we discover an even more stellar and glorious gift in the manger: Because of the darkness, the Light comes to us. Because of sin's death-dealing ways, the life-giving ways of faith in Jesus the Christ can reassure us that "all things are possible" because God is with us.

For me, Advent's message finds its integrity by placing the Prophets next to the Gospels—darkness against light, despair against hope, fear against love. So this book will not neglect the prophets who proclaim humanity's need for salvation and the expanse of God's desire for our redemption through Christ. This little book accords Prophet and Gospel equal honor. I pray you will find that God speaks to you in fresh, meaningful ways as you enter into this study, which is grounded in and born of God's holy word for the Advent season.