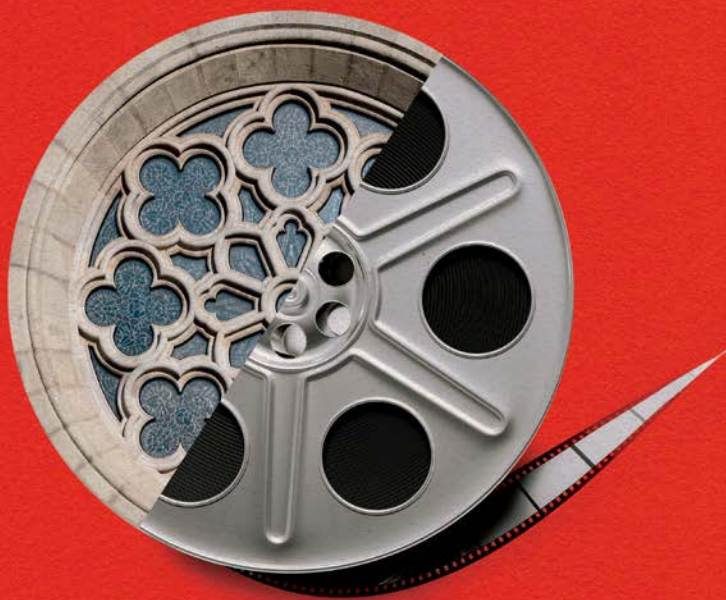


Films for All Seasons

Abby
Olcese

Foreword by
Josh Larsen



Experiencing the
Church Year at
the Movies



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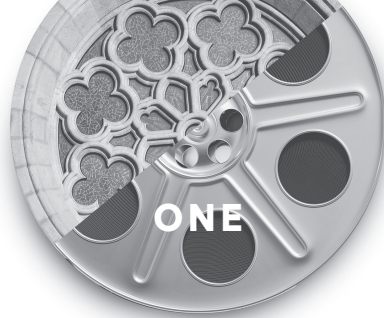
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Thoughts on Watching Devotionally

When we consider Christ's call to love others as we love ourselves, and as we encounter art that communicates something about the human experience, we find opportunities to empathize with people whose lives are very different from our own. It's important, therefore, to not only cast a wide net and engage with diverse, challenging stories, but also to think critically about what we're watching.

In an essay for Vox titled "Why Cultural Criticism Matters," writer and critic Emily St. James writes, "If [news] reporting can explain the world to us, cultural criticism can explain *us* to us."¹

Thinking about and digging into a culture's influential art, asking questions about it, and reading others' analysis of it helps us understand what was important to the audience that art was originally made for. These practices help us find commonalities with people from other cultural backgrounds, gender identities, or historical periods.

Just as we're called to critically engage with art, we're also called to critically examine the stories of the Bible. As a record of humankind's relationship to God, the Bible also exists, in a sense, to explain us to us. Every story, prophecy, and epistle contains important historical, social, and cultural contexts. If we engage deeply with the Scriptures, they can tell us about the time and place passages were written, and the audiences they were written for. Our modern response to what we

read is dependent on considering that context, generating empathy with the writer or the biblical figures they describe, and finding narrative and thematic patterns connecting ancient circumstances and spiritual lessons to our contemporary lives.

When I first started working as a film critic, I quickly found that the way I critically engaged with my faith and the way I looked at film used a similar process. As a critic, I ask myself many questions when I'm reviewing a movie, drawing on everything from writing to acting to artistic choices to technical aspects, to understand what the film I'm watching is trying to say, how it's trying to communicate those points, and whether I think it does so effectively.

We also use a similar process to study the Bible. In a small group study, we might make initial observations on parts of a passage that stand out to us or pose a question a biblical commentary along with further discussion can help us answer. On our own, devotional guides can help us understand what we read in specific contexts or guide us on a biblical journey.

When it comes to applying our critical understanding of a film to engaging spiritually with mainstream movies that might not have obvious spiritual content, combining elements of biblical devotional practice and art criticism can lead to rewarding results. Consider, for example, the devotional practice of *lectio divina*, which involves reading a scriptural passage three times, considering the same passage through a different lens each time. The steps of *lectio divina* include:

- Step one: Reading
 - Read the passage with attention to detail.
 - Note verses or phrases that stand out to you.
 - Consider the passage's meaning and context.
- Step two: Meditation
 - Think about how the reading connects to your life.
 - Imagine how it might feel if you were present to witness the moment in the passage yourself or hear the story being told.

- Step three: Contemplation
 - Consider what God might be trying to tell you through the passage. What do you feel you should take away or consider more deeply?

I'm not recommending you watch a movie three times in a row to gain a spiritual understanding of it (though repeat viewings of a film can reward you with new insights). As you watch along with the movies in this book, however, consider the following lectio-informed process to organize your thoughts:

- Level one: Viewing
 - What moments in the film stood out to you?
 - What is your immediate emotional reaction to what you watched?
 - What meaning did you glean from the movie? How did you see those ideas on display?
- Level two: Meditation
 - How do the themes in the movie connect to your life?
 - Whose perspective is the movie asking you to consider? How would you feel in that character's shoes?
 - Are there any other characters, scenes, or lines you personally identify with?
- Level three: Contemplation
 - What might God be inviting you to consider through this movie? What ideas, perspectives, or calls to action did you take away from the experience?
 - Did the movie attempt to challenge your existing understanding of a specific idea, kind of person, or experience? In what ways? Was it successful?

In addition to these ideas, each of the essays in this book includes further discussion questions for you to consider with a group or on your own. Taken together, they're meant to encourage a more holistic,

intellectual, and spiritually curious approach to each of the featured films, along with the ways they connect thematically to liturgical seasons in the church.

In *Movies Are Prayers: How Films Voice Our Deepest Longings*, Josh Larsen writes, “Films are not only artistic, business, and entertainment ventures. They are also elemental expressions of the human experience, message bottles sent in search of Someone who will respond.”² Using critical thinking to deepen your response to the art you encounter—and the people who create it—opens the door for a new way to view popular entertainment and, by extension, the world we live in. With these tools at your disposal, you may find movies are just the beginning of your journey toward seeing spiritual connections in the everyday and learning to better love your neighbor as a result.

With that in mind, let’s get started.


Advent

In God Is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas,
Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes:

Celebrating Advent means being able to wait. Waiting is an art that our impatient age has forgotten. It wants to break open the ripe fruit when it has hardly finished planting the shoot. But all too often, the greedy eyes are deceived; the fruit that seemed so precious is still green on the inside, and disrespectful hands ungratefully toss aside what has so disappointed them. Whoever does not know the austere blessedness of waiting—that is, of hopefully doing without—will never experience the full blessing of fulfillment.¹

Bonhoeffer wrote these words in 1943, and it's only become increasingly true since then. We order next-day or same-day shipping on clothing, toys, or appliances we simply can't wait to have on our doorstep, at the cost of environmental resources and poor working conditions for warehouse employees. We binge full seasons of television so we don't have to wait for a new episode every week, but are left unsatisfied when we hit the credits on the finale, having marathoned an experience designed to be savored.

Advent is an opportunity to slow down and practice the art of “hopefully doing without.” In this season of the liturgical calendar, we wait with Israel and the Virgin Mary for Christ's arrival and the fulfillment of God's promise. In our own lives, it's also a time to consider the ways we are called to actively believe in the



promise of a better world, because our faith tells us it will one day come.

The church calendar breaks the season of Advent into four weeks, each with accompanying themes. Week one considers hope, week two faith, week three joy, and week four peace, with all four themes together realized at the beginning of the Christmas season and Christ's birth. Each week of Advent gives us time to consider our relationship to these themes, what they mean in the context of the Bible, and their relevance in our lives and culture today.

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