

EXCERPT



Films for All Seasons Experiencing the Church Year at the Movies

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Liturgical seasons represent some of the most dramatic stories in the Bible. Many of these themes are also present in great films, some with direct religious influence, others with a secular perspective. Watching and discussing these stories in connection with their shared liturgical themes can help you see familiar stories and ideas in an exciting new light. In this book, film critic Abby Olcese invites you into a conversation with the rhythms of spiritual life through popular films that reflect the themes of the church year.

Why Watch Films as a Spiritual Practice?

Stories rule our lives. We use narrative to make sense of where we come from, the kind of person we want to be, and the people and experiences that have brought us to this point. When we make plans, we tell a story about what we think will happen. When we lie down at night and think back on what we did that day, we tell a story based on our memories. Stories stoke our curiosity, help us make sense of the world, and help us understand ourselves and others.

Our lives are also ruled by routines and rhythms, whether it's a schedule we plan ourselves or the natural rhythms of sleep, work, play, social engagement, or worship that dictate our week. At least in the Western world, that rhythm is a strange, potent mix of the religious and the secular. Each week contains days for work and days for rest that are based on the creation of the world in Genesis and the existence of the Sabbath. We observe the changing of the seasons with holidays and events that pull from natural patterns as well as biblical tradition.

If we think of our life as a story, seasons are how we mark the chapters. Whether it's spring, summer, fall, and winter, or the seasons of infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age—each one contains distinct themes.

In the life of the church, those chapters are marked by the liturgical calendar, the annual cycle that takes us on a narrative journey through the Bible. As with any good story, we get to know a set of characters, and follow them as they learn, grow, encounter joys and sorrows, die, and in the case of Jesus, resurrect. We're also constantly thinking about the ways this long story, made up of many stories, applies to the lives we lead now.

The writer Dorothy Sayers recognized the inherent drama of this process in her 1938 essay *The Greatest Drama Ever Staged*, in which she wrote of the role of storytelling in church tradition: "The Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man—and the dogma is the drama." The Bible tells an incredible story that weaves individual accounts of prophets, believers, disciples, the Son of God, and the early church into a grand arc that shows how followers of God have tried, sometimes succeeded and more often failed, to follow God's divine teachings, finally receiving ultimate salvation in the form of Jesus Christ.

The individual stories of the Bible contain lessons that teach us how to live well as Christians. They also communicate broader themes about the nature of God's love, how we're called to respond to it, the deeply human ways we often fall short of that calling, and the transcendent times when we manage to meet it. These themes link the entire book together, and become especially apparent during church holidays, when we specifically engage with the most powerful biblical narratives and the legacy of the church beyond them.

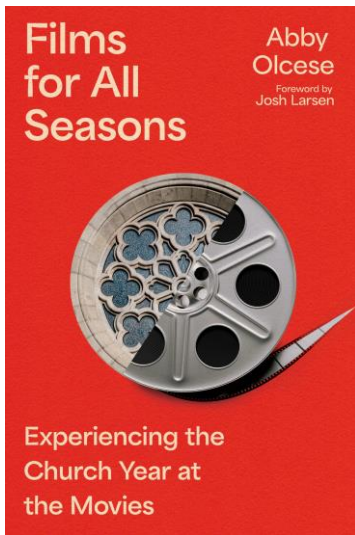


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STORIES AND THE CHURCH YEAR

Depending on the tradition you come from, your knowledge of the cycle of life in the church may be detailed or may be limited to major holidays like Christmas or Easter. I grew up attending churches that didn't spend much time on smaller holidays like Pentecost or All Saints' Day. As an adult, I became involved in the Episcopal Church, which emphasizes every aspect of the church liturgical year, to the point where, as in the Catholic church, even devotional readings are specifically structured to carry readers on a guided journey through the Bible together. Over time, my experiences helped me appreciate that church holidays offer unique opportunities for us to see the Bible as a grand overarching story, one that we as believers still play an active role in.

During Advent, we consider the themes of hope, faith, joy, and peace as we anticipate the coming of Christ. The hope of redemption is realized with the arrival of Christmas and the gifts of the magi at Epiphany. A few months later, we examine our own human limitations and the sinfulness of the world that required Christ's sacrifice through Ash Wednesday and Lent. Holy Week deepens this practice by recounting the events leading to the crucifixion. For five days, we experience the profound drama of Jesus' pain, Judas' betrayal, and the disciples' fear, anger, and sorrow. Easter finishes the cycle as we celebrate the triumph of the resurrection and the beauty of God's unconditional love.

The journey doesn't end there. Ascension Day celebrates the resurrected Jesus and presents the beginning of the disciples' ministry as Jesus returns to the Father. This moment further validates Christ's divine nature, while leaving the disciples—and us—asking, "What now?" Pentecost answers that question with a miraculous expansion of God's family, urging us to consider the diverse nature of the modern church.

All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day widen the scope, moving beyond the Bible to consider the "great cloud of witnesses" who have furthered the work of the church in the world and in our own lives. Together, these events in the church year weave an epic saga from Christ's conception, to the continuation of the ministry he began, to our roles in it now. To paraphrase Sayers' words, it is dogma as drama.

—adaptation from the introduction



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Abby Olcese is a writer on film, popular culture, and faith. Her work has appeared at Think Christian, Sojourners, Paste, RogerEbert.com, and /Film. She is also the film editor for *The Pitch*, a website and magazine serving the greater Kansas City, Missouri, area.

The Unexpected Intersection of Faith and Art

What elements of your past helped to inform the contents of this book?

Abby Olcese: I previously created a well-received article series on Thinkchristian.net on films to watch for various church holidays and realized it could be expanded into longer essays. Secondly, I grew up as part of a larger Christian culture that told me most forms of mainstream entertainment were dangerous or bad, but encouraged by my parents to seek out many diverse kinds of art. It took me a long time to realize that not only was that not true, but that in the case of movies, many of my favorite films had themes that connected directly to my favorite parts of my faith. I want to help other people learn how to love movies the same way that I have.

What do you see as the connection between movies and the church calendar?

Abby: Many people have movies they love watching at Christmas, or perhaps at Easter. However, the church year is made up of many holidays with themes we don't spend as much time unpacking, with universal themes that are also present in much of popular culture. *Films for All Seasons* presents a way to engage with all the themes of the church year through films that address those familiar ideas in new and sometimes challenging ways.

What do you hope readers will gain from reading your book?

Abby: The elements of theology and cinema are equally important to me. The five main takeaways listed below are shared in priority order:

1. Secular art and Christian faith are not mutually exclusive, and often intersect in unexpected ways.
2. Developing critical thinking skills can help us better engage with our world and what we believe, and exploring film is an easily accessible way to exercise those skills.
3. Popular storytelling, and particularly stories about people whose lives are different from our own, can help us learn how to love our neighbors better.
4. The Christian liturgical calendar is full of powerful dramatic moments that help us connect to the biblical characters we're reading about.
5. The themes of holidays in the church year are an invitation to us to examine certain parts of our lives, and how we can better love God, our neighbors, and ourselves.



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