

2021 Advent Film Club: Films in the Wilderness

An Advent resource adaptable for weekly personal devotions, family discussions, Zoom small groups or Sunday School.

What's inside?

Reflections on Film & Faith

Weekly prompts including...

- A lectionary selection for the coming Sunday.
- A film selection that connects with the theme(s) of Advent.
- Reflection questions for personal or corporate use.
- Creative space for you to respond to the Gospel & film however you are inspired.

Bonus Features

- Faith & Film Book Recommendations
- Additional Advent Themed Movie Recommendations

Connect Further

- Rev. Karl Stevens & Rev. Jed Dearing will be hosting Films in the Wilderness, a weekly companion podcast discussing each film and the gospel lesson with a special guest. New episodes release every Friday during Advent beginning on Friday, December 3. Available on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, & Stitcher. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/films-in-the-wilderness/id151833936>
- Join the Diocesan Film Club discussion on Zoom every **Thursday during Advent (Dec 2, 9, 16, 23) at 7:00pm**. Hosted by Rev. Jed Dearing & Rev. Karl Stevens, this will be a lively discussion engaging both the film selection and the Lectionary lesson appointed for the coming Sunday. Each week is a self-contained conversation, meaning you can join for one week or as many as you'd like. <https://uso2web.zoom.us/j/85117259208>

Thursday, December 2 [Luke 21:25-36] *Pain & Glory*

Thursday, December 9 [Luke 3:1-6] *Wild Rose*

Thursday, December 16 [Zephaniah 3:14-20] *Happiest Season*

Thursday, December 23 [Hebrews 10:5-10] *The Green Knight*

All films are readily available to stream for free or rent at a low cost. Many libraries offer robust blu-ray and dvd collections that include these selected films.

Films in the Wilderness

Movie theaters have often been described as churches. A large room where one goes to sit quietly and bask in grandeur, pay attention to signs and symbols, be transported to other times and places, an opportunity to be awakened, inspired or challenged. Movie going in and of itself can be a ritual act not far off from attending church. Some of us arrive early to sit quietly; others never make it before the opening scene, but always search for their favorite seat as if it were the family pew. A precious few remain seated all the way through the closing credits; undoubtedly the same group as those who remain in place for the postlude following Holy Eucharist. Then comes the spill out into the lobby discussing the emotions, insights, and critiques generated by the movie, not far off from coffee hour conversations filled with gratefulness for a favorite hymn, questions of the liturgy or reactions to the sermon.

This Advent I invite you to incorporate your movie watching as a spiritual exercise by joining in with the Advent Film Club; watching the weekly movie selection, reading the lectionary text for the coming Sunday and engaging them in conversation in one of the many ways offered in this guide. Like a spiritual practice I encourage you to take the time to watch the film of the week in a darkened room, free of distraction, with your phone powered down and laptop set aside. Approach the movie as a possibility for a prayerful encounter with God, a way to grow in empathy for others and a chance to have your perspective on the Gospel passages enlivened through this visual medium.

Anglican theologian David Brown advocates for the potential sacramentality of the whole created order, writing that spiritual grace is to be found in the outward and visible signs of art. As Episcopalians we hold that the holy is intertwined in the world and includes great works of art from those who may not identify as Christian or even religious. The “sacramentality of deep experience through moments of disclosure, contemplation and paradox” is God speaking to us in and through a film. What might God disclose to you through a contemplative viewing of a movie?

Film critic Roger Ebert wrote “For me, the movies are like a machine that generates empathy. If it’s a great movie, it lets you understand a little bit more about what it’s like to be a different gender, a different race, a different age, a different economic class, a different nationality, a different profession, different hopes, aspirations, dreams and fears. It helps us to identify with the people who are sharing this journey with us. And that, to me, is the most noble thing that good movies can do.” In this polarized climate, we could all use help generating empathy as we seek to do the baptismal work of striving for justice and peace while treating all persons with dignity. Perhaps this Advent, the stories, images and music bound together in these movies will be a machine of God working to soften our hardened hearts towards the needs of our community and those beyond?

I’m grateful for the gifts of the myriad artists who contribute to the production of a single film. I’m excited to view the stories they felt called to bring to the screen and then to engage with one another to contemplate how the films speak to us as a voice in the wilderness, preparing the way.

Watching with you,
Rev. Jed Dearing, Priest in Residence at St. Francis Springboro

Week One in Advent

Film: Pain and Glory (2019) Dir. Pedro Almodóvar

Free w/Starz, available to rent on all major streaming platforms. Runtime: 1h54m.

Antonio Banderas plays Salvador Mallo, a filmmaker in the twilight of his career, remembering his life: his mother, his lovers, the actors he worked with. The sixties in a small village in Valencia, the eighties in Madrid, the present, when he feels an immeasurable emptiness, facing his mortality, the incapability of continuing filming, the impossibility of separating creation from his own life. “How do you come back from the dead? For Salvador, the answer comes in fits and starts, in the burnished images of his childhood, in an old lover’s passion, in the power of art. It also comes in his love for his mother, Jacinta, who as an older woman nearing death, voices distaste for autobiographical fiction, telling Salvador he wasn’t a good son. Salvador listens, and he apologizes. And then he takes the messiness, the vibrancy and the sensuous pleasures of life as he remembers it and turns his pain — and hers — into glory.” *Manohla Dargis*

Gospel: Luke 21:25-36

“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. “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Reflection & Discussion

Observation(s)

- How did the film make you feel?
- What aspect of the film did you most engage with? What will you remember?
- What does it make you think about?

Interpretation(s)

- What are the key themes of the film?
- How is the theme explored and emphasized?
- What is the worldview offered by this film?
- What resonates with you? Why?

Connection(s)

- Where do the themes of the film intersect with the gospel reading?

- How do they enlighten each other?
- How do they counter each other?

Action(s)

- In light of these selections and your reflection, what response might God want from you? From the church?

Create

Space for you to further react to the reflection questions, to doodle, draw, paint, write a poem or compose a song in response to this week's selections.

Week Two in Advent

Film: Wild Rose (2018) Dir. Tom Harper

Free w/Hulu & Kanopy, available to rent on all major streaming platforms. Runtime: 3 hrs.

A young Scottish singer from Glasgow, Rose-Lynn Harlan, dreams of making it as a country artist in Nashville after being released from prison. The film takes an interest in the daily lives of blue-collar workers and in the trade-offs of pursuing dreams. “At first gingerly, and then with real intent, the film puts an elbow into the hot waters of motherhood, of female sacrifice, of what becomes of our sense of self and right to personal nourishment. There, the film — and specifically a beautifully paired Julie Walters and Jessie Buckley — shines, swelling around the issues it kneads without hitting upon any easy answers. For the journey, it turns out, is not one of the 3,900 miles from Glasgow to Nashville, but the distance between a mother and daughter, and for Rose-Lynn, the journey to find herself.” *Terri White*

Gospel: Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

Reflection & Discussion

Observation(s)

- How did the film make you feel?
- What aspect of the film did you most engage with? What will you remember?
- What does it make you think about?

Interpretation(s)

- What are the key themes of the film?
- How is the theme explored and emphasized?
- What is the worldview offered by this film?
- What resonates with you? Why?

Connection(s)

- Where do the themes of the film intersect with the gospel reading?
- How do they enlighten each other?
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Action(s)

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Week Three in Advent

Film: Happiest Season (2020) Dir. Clea DuVall

Free w/Hulu. Runtime: 2 hrs.

Harper (Mackenzie Davis) and Abby (Kristen Stewart) have a perfect relationship — loving, patient, understanding — but the stakes are about to get higher, and their devotion is about to be put to the test: Abby is planning on asking Harper to marry her on Christmas Day, and Harper has invited Abby home to spend the holidays with her family — who think both women are straight. It's an embarrassment of holiday rom-com riches, a lively, attractive paean to impressing and caring for the ones you love which grapples with the impossible expectations of perfection and happiness — all in the name of a good Christmas. It's more complicated than just saying the right words at the right time: the glee of the holidays, here, must be earned. *Ella Kemp*

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.

Reflection & Discussion

Observation(s)

- How did the film make you feel?
- What aspect of the film did you most engage with? What will you remember?
- What does it make you think about?

Interpretation(s)

- What are the key themes of the film?
- How is the theme explored and emphasized?
- What is the worldview offered by this film?
- What resonates with you? Why?

Connection(s)

- Where do the themes of the film intersect with the lectionary reading?
- How do they enlighten each other?
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Action(s)

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Week Four in Advent

Film: *The Green Knight* (2021) Dir. David Lowery

Available to rent on all major streaming platforms. Runtime: 2h10m.

There were few subjects as popular in Middle English literature as knights and beheading, which accounts for the enduring success of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: a 14-century chivalric romance concerning the fortunes of King Arthur's young nephew and the mysterious figure who challenges him to a friendly Yuletide game. Scholars have bickered over the myriad potential interpretations of the anonymous poem for centuries, and now comes a new cinematic interpretation from David Lowery. The journey to seek his destiny becomes Gawain's noble quest, taking him across the windswept British isles where he encounters all manner of friends and foes. Outside the bustle of Camelot, a wild land awaits the hapless young lord, and while his naivety once seemed sweet, in the world beyond the castle walls it's a threat to his survival. Lowery never equivocates at any point along Sir Gawain's journey from the Round Table to the forest citadel where his fate awaits. Instead, he pulls tight on the tangled knots that have bound this saga to our collective imagination for so many centuries, and braids them all into a timeless fantasy about the struggle to make sense of an irreconcilable world. Hypnotic from its fiery start to its gut-punch of a finale, "*The Green Knight*" might ride into theaters on 600 years' worth of unsettled history, but Lowery makes it feel brand new by re-saddling it as a personal story about someone who's just trying to become the kind of man he can live with, even if it kills him. *David Ehrlich*

Hebrews 10:5-10

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure.

Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God' (in the scroll of the book it is written of me)." When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), then he added, "See, I have come to do your will." He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Reflection & Discussion

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Bonus Features

Book Recommendations

How to Watch a Movie by David Thomson

Movies as Prayers: How Films Voice Our Deepest Longings by Josh Larsen

Signs & Symbols in Christian Art by George Ferguson

Advent Family Film Recommendations

Week One: The Breadwinner (2017) dir. Nora Twomey: *Now available to rent streaming on all major services*

The Breadwinner uses animation to capture the horror of children living under strife in a way that is true to their struggle, while also honoring their imaginative resilience. When her father is arrested by the Taliban, a young girl must pose as a boy in order to provide food for her mother, sister, and baby brother, who all share a two-room space in Kabul. This simple, sorrowful story, drawn from Deborah Ellis' children's novel, unfolds with an animated artistry that is nothing short of majestic. *Josh Larsen*

Week Two: Kubo and the Two Strings (2016) Travis Knight: *Now available to rent streaming on all major services*

"Memories are powerful things," Kubo is told early on, and that sentiment is soon brought to life by a truly unforgettable journey. Kubo mesmerizes the people in his village with his magical gift for spinning wild tales with origami. When he accidentally summons an evil spirit seeking vengeance, Kubo is forced to go on a quest to solve the mystery of his fallen samurai father and his mystical weaponry, as well as discover his own magical powers. *David Ehrlich*

Week Three: Sing Street (2016) dir. John Carney: *Free to stream on Hoopla & Vudu. Now available to rent on all major streaming services.*

A boy growing up in Dublin during the 1980s escapes his strained family life by starting a band to impress the mysterious girl he likes in this joy filled musical. "Sing Street" has a good and generous heart, there are openly crowd-pleasing scenes. The triumphs are satisfying, the barriers are frustrating and even heartbreaking, the sweeping connections, when they come, work on that primal level that gets underneath the skin, vibrates on a certain frequency. *Sheila O'Malley*

Week Four: Ponyo (2008) dir. Hayao Miyazaki: *Free to stream on HBOMax*

During a forbidden excursion to see the surface world, a goldfish princess encounters a human boy named Sosuke, who gives her the name Ponyo. Ponyo longs to become human, and as her friendship with Sosuke grows, she becomes more humanlike. Offering respite from the adult perspective without denying it, Miyazaki's films invite viewers into exalted states of innocence. For parents, they're practically field guides. We may bring our children out to sea or into the woods and say, "Isn't this wonderful?" But in order to think so, in order to be moved, the kids must explore those precious places themselves, at least enough to accumulate their own experiences—fantastical perhaps, but also mundane—and later remember and yearn for and reforge them by way of imagination. *Jonathan Kiefer*