Spirituality
Soul Seeing



(Unsplash/Samuel Lopes)

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December 16, 2023

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Christmastime, like the Easter season, is a time for Jesus movies on TV. I saw many of them in the 1960s when biblical epics were as popular as Marvel movies are today. I sought them out then; I avoid most of them now. They have their place, but the Jesus they portray is not the Jesus I have come to know. Here are a few of them:

- "King of Kings" (1961), starring matinee idol Jeffrey Hunter who hung on the cross with shaved armpits. Time magazine dubbed the movie "I Was a Teenage Jesus."
- "The Greatest Story Ever Told" (1965), starring Max von Sydow as a very serious Jesus straight out of an Ingmar Bergman movie. The movie is noteworthy for John Wayne's cameo as a centurion who stands by the cross and utters in a gravelly voice, "Truly this man was the son of God."
- "The Gospel According to St. Matthew" (1964) directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini featuring a socialist Jesus who was all the rage at the time among Vatican II Catholics like me.

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Then came:

- "Jesus Christ Superstar" (1973) with Jesus as a misunderstood rock star and Judas as the tragic hero. "What's the buzz?" sings Peter when soldiers arrest Jesus in the garden. "Tell me what's a-happening. What's the buzz? Tell me what's a-happening? Tell me what's a-happening, oh!"
- "Godspell" (1973), an exception that proves the rule. My favorite because it doesn't pretend to be history, but is instead a joyful romp through Manhattan at dawn with exuberant young actors singing songs that illuminate Jesus' teachings and express the love of God. "Day by day, day by day, O dear Lord, three things I pray: to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly. Day by day."

And in this century:

- "The Passion of the Christ" (2004), a great try by Mel Gibson who gives us a very human Jesus who in a lovely scene playfully splashes water on his mother, and they both laugh as Mary chases him around the table with a wooden spoon. Regrettably, the movie has way too much blood.

- "The Chosen" (2017), a miniseries that may be the best of the lot. Jesus is a charismatic mensch who chooses a raggedy bunch of disciples, each with a charming backstory, to change the world. If you're going to do a straightforward narrative, this is the way to do it.



Actor Jonathan Roumie, who plays Jesus Christ in the streaming series "The Chosen," is pictured in a scene depicting the Sermon on the Mount. (OSV News/Vidangel Studios)

Splice together the best stuff from the best of these movies — like the Mel Gibson scene of Jesus and Mary having fun, or the one in "Ben-Hur" when Charlton Heston, chained and weak, receives water from Jesus but all we see is Jesus' hand holding the cup and the gratitude and awe in Ben-Hur's face. Or take the scene in the Max von Sydow movie where Jesus dies on the cross as a storm erupts and we hear the music swell and see Jesus' blood drip from the cross as the rain pours and it mixes with the water on the ground and streams down Calvary in every direction, baptizing the earth with God's DNA and reminding us that every bloodstream can be traced

back to a pool of life at the foot of a cross. Yes, put scenes like that together and you'll have a great movie about Jesus!

You could even intersperse scenes from some of the great classics that remind us who and where we really are, and what we are here for. For instance, you could insert that scene from "On the Waterfront" where Father Barry (Karl Malden) prays over the corpse of a longshoreman murdered by the mob and says to those who just stand there and refuse to speak up, "Some people think the crucifixion took place only on Calvary. They better wise up. [This] is a crucifixion!" A thug throws garbage at the priest: "Go back to your church, Father!" Barry answers:

> Boys, this is my church! And if you don't think Christ is down here on the waterfront, you've got another guess coming! Every morning when the hiring boss blows his whistle, Jesus stands alongside you in the shape-up. He sees why some of you get picked and some of you get passed over. He sees the family men worrying about getting the rent and getting food in the house for the wife and the kids. … Every fellow down here is your brother in Christ! … He's kneeling right here beside Dugan. And he's saying with all of you, if you do it to the least of mine, you do it to me!

Why, that would make it an even greater movie. But still not the greatest Jesus movie ever made.

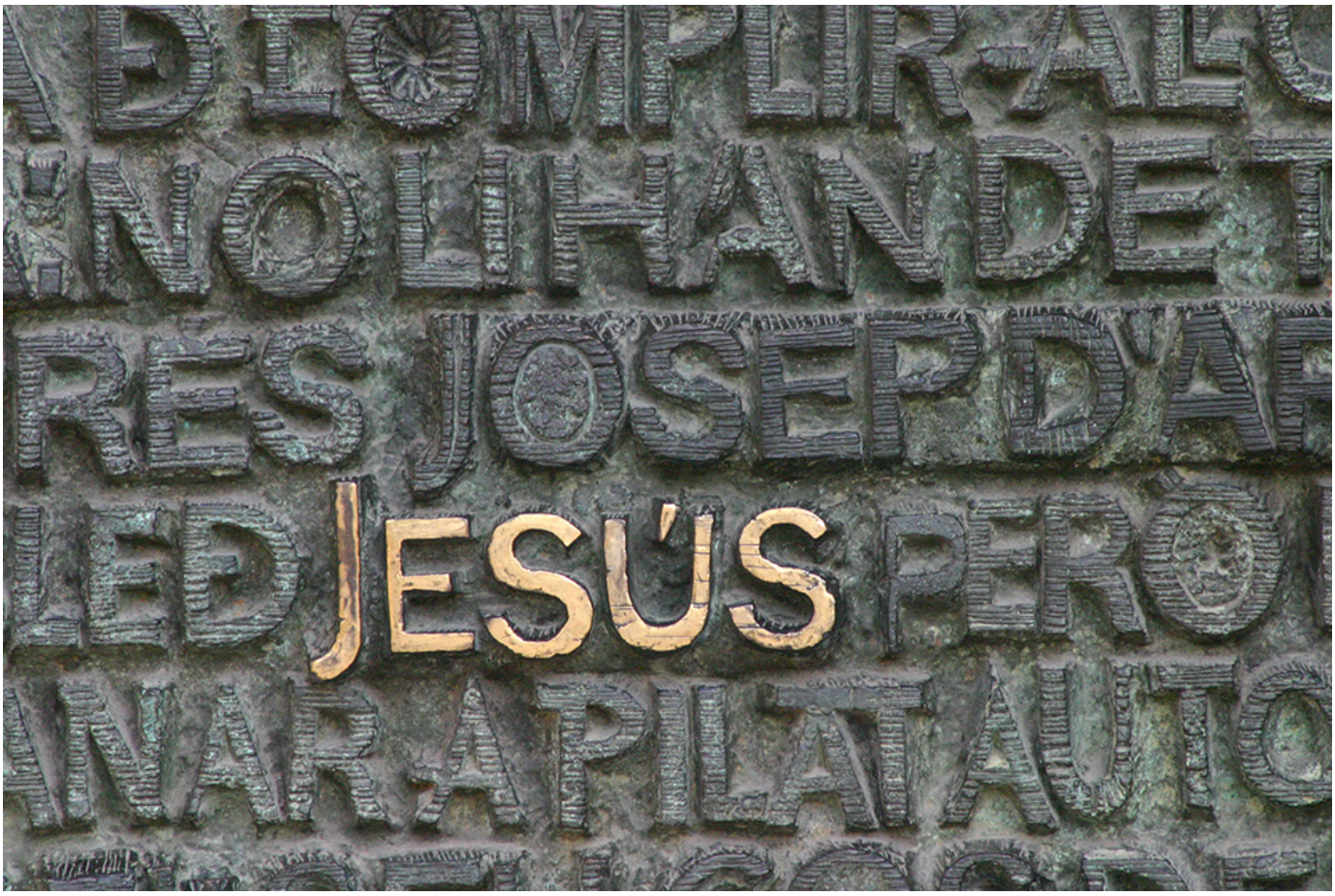
> The film of guilt, unlike the kingdom of God shining within us like a city on a hill, grows dark as it runs through the sprockets of our minds.
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The greatest Jesus movie has never been made because it has no beginning and no ending. It is much more than a historical recreating of Jesus of Nazareth's life. It's an ongoing revelation of the Word made flesh in us, a mystical journey into each of our individual souls and into the one big soul we all share. It is a realization of the Christ who lives and suffers and dies and rises again and again in each and all of us; a re-membering of our mystical union and the real meaning of life.

If you made a movie about Adam and Eve it would represent only what we've been taught about ourselves and where we appear to be: guilty and banished from Eden,

separated from God and from each other. The Jesus movie, however, would remind us what is real, that the Fall is a nightmare that only seems real, that in truth "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28), that God is not vengeful but non-conditional, all inclusive, everywhere active, love made manifest among us in Jesus (1 John 4:9-19), and that nothing, not even sin (John 8:3-11) can separate us from this tremendous lover and the love of God (Romans 8:38-39).

The film of guilt, unlike the kingdom of God shining within us like a city on a hill, grows dark as it runs through the sprockets of our minds. We seem to be walking through the "valley of the shadow of death" (and that's all a movie is, light and shadows projected onto a screen), but we can be sure that Christ walks with us, to comfort and guide us until we awaken from this illusion of life on the waterfront we call the world.



(Unsplash/Mark Fletcher Brown)

It's like we're sleepwalking in a film noir from the 1950s, and like "Lil' Susie" on the Everly Brothers song track, we need to wake up. St. Paul shouts out, "Open your

eyes, sleepy head, rise from the dead, and let Christ give you light!" (Eph. 5:14). When we let the Christ light in through the crack in our consciousness, the movie turns technicolor and we become like Jesus, a light in the world.

Revisit the Bethlehem scene through the light of your soul, and you'll see the infant Jesus born in a manger and rebirthed again and again as innocent souls in Beijing and the Bronx, Israel and Gaza, Paris, France, and Paris, Kansas, everywhere all at once. In the greatest Jesus movie, Christmas comes every day.

We can't change the world but we can see the world in a different light, and that can make a difference. Then, as Jesus grows in wisdom and grace, the screen shows us not only an actor repeating the words of the Sermon on the Mount on a make-believe hill in a make-believe Galilee, but Jesus' followers from all time and space practicing those words in cities and savannas, street corners and prisons, suburbs and favelas, food kitchens and homeless shelters, hospitals and nursing homes, classrooms and boardrooms, on earth as it is in heaven.

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Father Barry was right: what happens to one of us happens to all of us. What blesses one, blesses all. We are our brother's keeper because we are our brother, we are our sister and God is mother/father of us all. We are spiritual beings made of the very same stuff — love — as our creator. God can no more abandon us than we can run away from God.

The journalist Frank Bruni observed, "We are each the star of our own movie and supporting actors in everyone else's. There is only one big movie and it is happening all at once."

I am the star in mine and you support me. You are the star in yours and I support you. Everyone who ever lived is the star of theirs, and we all support each other. All these trillions of stories make up the one big movie, and it is the light of Christ that makes them whole.

That's why the greatest Jesus movie can never be made. It is the one and only neverending story.