

# Movie/Video Study

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## Jesus Christ Superstar

Universal Pictures

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### Introduction

In 1973, director Norman Jewison directed the film version of the rock opera “Jesus Christ Superstar.” After a successful stint on Broadway, the film enjoyed moderate success at the box office. JCS lives on for a new generation to enjoy on DVD. Though some of the images and references are a bit dated, the powerful music and beautiful cinematography keep young people engaged.

This movie is rich with discussion topics. Jewison (along with lyricist Tim Rice and composer Andrew Lloyd Weber) do not play it safe in how they tell the Passion story. It’s clear that political and religious statements are being made throughout and many of these statements will resonate with the young people of today. It will be important for the group to explore the Passion narrative from the gospels to address some of the questions that are raised by the film. The recent revealing of the restored Gospel of Judas document may put offer some interesting and though provoking twists in the discussion... if you choose to weave it in.

My suggestion is to just watch the movie and see what happens. When the credits start to role, start by allowing people to ask questions. If nobody takes the bait, go with something like, “The most entertaining part of the movie was...” or “I was most moved at \_\_\_\_\_ part” or “The best song in the movie was \_\_\_\_\_.” Hopefully that will get the ball rolling.

If the group has nothing to say, try to bring up some topics that you’ve pre-determined. I encourage you to come up with your own. However, here are my Top 5 (in chronological order):

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### *My Mind is Clearer Now*

Superstar is, among other things, a character study of Judas. In fact, some productions of the rock opera consider the person playing Judas to be the lead, not the actor playing Jesus. Young people might find this interesting, as Judas is only mentioned a few times in scripture, although the newly revealed Gospel of Judas has stirred up some new discussion and debate about his role. (National Geographic article on the Gospel of Judas:

[http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2006/04/0406\\_060406\\_gospel.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2006/04/0406_060406_gospel.html))

## Discussion questions

- Does Judas seem like a bad guy or a good guy? Is he both? How are we the same?... both good and bad. (Remember Luther's idea of us being simultaneously saint and sinner? Article from *The Lutheran* magazine:  
[http://www.thelutheran.org/article/article.cfm?article\\_id=4210](http://www.thelutheran.org/article/article.cfm?article_id=4210))
- What is Judas' motivation in the opening song? Do you think Judas has legitimate concerns? Why or why not?
- What is Judas' tone in the movie? Angry? Confused? Concerned? Something else?

## Explore scripture

Ask someone to read [Luke 22:3-6](#) aloud.

- What caused Judas to betray Jesus? (Satan entered him.) One of the themes of the film is that Judas was not evil; he was being used by God to bring about the salvation of the world. Do you agree with this, or is this just a cop-out to make Judas look like a tragic figure?

Have someone read [Matthew 27:3-10](#) aloud.

- This is the account of Judas' suicide. What is the explanation given in Matthew about why Judas killed himself? (To fulfill scripture.) Does this make sense?
- Do you know anyone who has attempted suicide? Do you know anyone who has been successful? (Allow time and space for discussion to happen, listen carefully, and follow-up with youth who share personal stories or seem uneasy during the discussion.)
- What can you do if you think someone is suicidal or is talking about suicide? (Bottom line: don't ignore the person or the possibility. Take them seriously.) What would you do if that person was you? (**Offer some suggestions based on current suicide prevention resources. See the "suicide prevention and care" section of the ELCA Youth Ministries links page: <http://www.elca.org/youth/links.html>**)

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## *I Don't Know How to Love Him*

This song, sung by Mary Magdalene's character, was the most successful single from this soundtrack. It's clear the implication throughout this movie is: A) Mary is a prostitute, and B) she is struggling in her relationship with Jesus.

## Discussion questions

- What seems to be bothering Mary Magdalene in this scene?
- Do you think there was more to Jesus and Mary's relationship than teacher/follower?
- Do you consider Mary to be a disciple? Why or why not?
- Do you ever have conflicting feelings/emotions about a person? How do you handle it?

## Explore scripture

- Take a few minutes for students to flip through the gospels and look for occasions when

Mary Magdalene is present. What does scripture say about her? More importantly, what does scripture not say about her? Discuss your findings.

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## ***Gethsemane***

This is the last song that Jesus sings in the film. It is a powerful song and one of several 'real' moments where we see Jesus as a down-to-earth man. Young people tend to identify with this scene because of the doubts and questions they have on their journey of faith.

### **Discussion questions**

- How does Jesus feel about following through with the plan?
- Does it seem plausible that Jesus would have second thoughts? What does this say about the complexity of Jesus' character?
- Have you ever changed your mind about something that was going to be difficult? What was it? What did you end up deciding to do?
- Why do you think the filmmakers chose to bring famous paintings into this scene?

### **Explore scripture**

- Read [Luke 22:39-46](#).
  - Why do you think that Jesus is having such a hard time carrying out the plan?
  - Discuss what you know about the arrest, beating, and crucifixion of Jesus. Perhaps the group members could research crucifixion. Knowing what you know about this torture and death, would you have second-thoughts too?
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## ***Could We Start Again, Please?***

This song, sung by Peter and Mary, was not in the original score of the Broadway rock opera. It was added for the film and in subsequent stage productions. Some directors choose to end the production with this piece and not place it prior to Jesus' death (as in the film).

### **Discussion questions**

- It seems that Peter and Mary finally understand what Jesus has been talking about for 3 years. What took them so long?
- We have the benefit of reading scripture today and knowing how the story of Jesus ends. Do you think you would have been feeling the same way Peter and Mary felt? Why or why not?
- Do you feel like you let Jesus down sometimes? When?
- Has it ever taken you a while to figure out what someone has been trying to say? What were the circumstances? Was it really important?

### **Explore scripture**

- We can identify with Peter. **Take a look at some of the instances in scripture when**

**Peter just doesn't get it:**

- [Matthew 14:28-33](#) (The water-walking incident)
- [Mark 14:66-72](#) (Denying Jesus)
- [Mark 14:32-42](#) (Sleepy head) Jesus is patient with Peter, and eventually empowers Peter to be “the rock.”

• **Take a look at these instances when Peter does get it:**

- [John 21:15-19](#) (Peter empowered with leadership)
- [Acts 3:1-10](#) (Peter heals a crippled beggar)
- [Acts 4:13](#) (The boldness of Peter) Talk about a time in your life when God was patient with you. How did it feel? Were you able to respond?

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## ***No Resurrection!?!?!***

A common criticism of Jesus Christ Superstar is the apparent absence of a resurrection scene. Some stage productions of JCS include a resurrection sequence. The original Webber/Rice score does not have Christ resurrected. Some people consider the closing shot in the film to be Jewison's tip of the hat to Christians looking for an empty tomb. At the bottom of the screen when the camera zooms out from the empty cross, you see silhouettes of a shepherd and sheep walking from right to left. One interpretation is that this is the Good Shepherd leading his 'sheep' home.

## **Discussion questions**

- Why do you think Superstar doesn't end with a glorious resurrection? What effect does it have on you, the viewer, to not have a happy ending?
- Did you see the shepherd and sheep at the bottom of the screen? Do you think this is the resurrection scene? Where else do we see the shepherd and sheep? (Last Supper scene)

## **Explore scripture**

- **Have the group read [John 20:1-18](#).**
- Who is the first to see the tomb empty? What was the response?
- Who do you think is this other disciple?
  
- **Next, take a look at [Luke 24:1-10](#).**
- How is this account of the resurrection similar? How is it different?
- What is the disciples' response to Mary's news?
- How was Peter's reaction compared to the others'?
  
- **Finally, examine [John 20:24-29](#).**
- This is the (only) account of Doubting Thomas and Jesus from the gospels. How are we like Thomas? (We doubt at times, we have to believe without seeing, we want physical proof, etc.)
- What was Jesus' response to Thomas' unbelief?

- Is there a difference between faith and belief?
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### **Other highlights that might be worth discussing are:**

- Herod's song.
  - What's up with the tanks and fighter planes?
  - Does Judas come back from heaven to sing the theme song?
  - The temple scene with the money changers.
  - Modern (1970s) and ancient images woven together throughout the film.
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### **Closing prayer**

*God, thank you for the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of your son, Jesus Christ. Help us to be radical like Jesus was in sharing your message of justice, love, forgiveness, and mercy with the world. Thank you for being with us and leading us on our journey of faith. Amen*

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