

Historic all-sign-language movie 'Jesus: A Deaf Missions Film' comes to theaters

by [Kathryn Post](#)

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A still from *Jesus: A Deaf Missions Film*. (Photo courtesy of Deaf Missions)

Joseph Josselyn remembers being fascinated by the 1977 drama *Jesus of Nazareth* —but as a Deaf child, he had to rely on closed captions to catch the dialogue.

“I had this thought: I wonder what it would be like if this film was completely in sign language,” Josselyn said in a recent interview over Zoom facilitated by an American Sign Language interpreter.

His career since could arguably be described as a journey to finding out. On June 20, a movie telling the story of Jesus entirely in American Sign Language will become the first all-ASL feature film to debut in theaters, according to Josselyn, the film’s producer.

[Jesus: A Deaf Missions Film](#), which carries the tagline “for Deaf, by Deaf,” stars Gideon Firl as the Messiah who, like all of the primary cast, signs his way through the role.

[Deaf Missions](#) is an international Christian ministry with the goal of creating high-quality videos and visual tools in sign language. Josselyn, who joined in 2006, began with shorter projects before producing the 2018 film [The Book of Job](#), an earlier all-ASL movie with an all-Deaf cast and production team that was released on video and streaming.

After the Job project, Josselyn returned to his dream of telling the gospel story in an ASL feature. Producer Michael Davis, who joined on in 2022, shared that dream. Together, the duo pitched the idea to Deaf Missions CEO Chad Entinger, estimating that the project would require \$4.8 million to fund.

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“Our passion was really to see high-quality, Deaf film to be produced. We couldn’t do that with a low budget,” said Josselyn.

The funds secured, Josselyn and Davis had to decide how to frame their adaptation. Perhaps appropriately for a film about breaking language barriers, they chose to bookend the narrative with Pentecost, a moment described in the Book of Acts when the Holy Spirit descends on the disciples so their preaching can be understood by a crowd that speaks many languages.

While the plot’s points are familiar to even casual Christians, the film’s use of ASL makes for particularly embodied expression. Every townspeople, priest, Christ follower, and zealot is filmed in full view, so that their signing remains visible.

“Even hearing people who don’t know sign language will be able to connect, not just through the subtitles, but how expressive it is,” Davis said. “You listen to a lot with your eyes as well.”

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Originally envisioned as a film without sound, the final version of the film includes a soundtrack created by two music producers—one Deaf, the other hearing—as well as background noises and sound effects to create a more immersive experience. Deaf viewers will be able to hear the music through the vibrations, said Josselyn, and

some Deaf audience members can hear some sounds too, Davis added. For nonsigning viewers, there are English subtitles.

The film's launch on the big screen was an unexpected development for Davis and Josselyn, who initially expected it to be shown in churches and community centers. The film will be shown in more than 300 theaters starting this week, making possible an unprecedented cinematic experience.

Despite the barriers encountered during the project, the filmmakers agreed it was worthwhile when they saw audience reactions to the film for the first time in prescreenings this spring.

"This film is for Deaf, by Deaf. That part is clear. But I just want to encourage the hearing community to come and be a part and watch the film," said Josselyn.

"We want them to come and share this unique experience, understand our culture just a little better, and celebrate this historical moment in time, of the first ever full feature film about Jesus in sign language." —Religion News Service