EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

"I Just Want Somebody's Faith to Be Increased, Even If It's One Person"

Aspen Kennedy on playing Joseph "Junie" Love in God With Us, the late-night hallway take that made the film, the Apple Store stranger who pointed him toward acting, and why a modern nativity story arrives at the right moment.

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine

Aspen Kennedy did not treat *God With Us* like another job that might fit between other offers. Written and directed by Jimmy Jenkins, the modern-day nativity parable follows inner-city childhood sweethearts Mary Anne Thomas and Joseph "Junie" Love as they step into a divine mission shaped by grace, growth, and unconditional love. Kennedy, the Memphis-born actor known for Sony Pictures' *The Forge* and for finding his first network role on *Queen Sugar* near graduation, plays Junie. Opening in select theatres nationwide November 13, 2026, from Blue Harbor Entertainment and Variance Films, the film asks what the story of Mary and Joseph might look like if it unfolded in today's world.

Paul Salfen caught up with Kennedy for AMFM Magazine as the movie headed toward that theatrical launch. Fresh off premiere audiences who told him the film touched their hearts, Kennedy talked about Jenkins's kingdom-minded passion, a set that felt like family, the prayer that started his career, and the hope that even one viewer might leave with faith increased.

A CALLING, NOT JUST A ROLE

Actors get offered projects all the time. Some feel optional. This one, Salfen suggested, felt like a calling. Kennedy agreed without hesitation.

"Truly, truly," he said. When he read the script, he realized he had never seen a modern nativity story told this way. What sealed it was hearing Jenkins's heart behind the project, and the director's passion to make an impact for God's kingdom.

The writing mattered as much as the invitation. Kennedy has seen faith-centered opportunities where the vision never quite lands. This script was different. "The script was amazing," he said of Jenkins's work. "Jimmy is an amazing guy. He did a great job."

Sacred territory comes with understandable caution. Some people, Kennedy noted, might look at a contemporary retelling and worry. He does not want them worried. The film is family friendly, he said, and that concern was one of the first things he raised with Jenkins. The director answered it on screen before the story even begins.

Kennedy described a disclaimer over black at the start of the movie: they are not trying to recreate Christ's work, because Christ already came. Instead, the film imagines what it would be like for humanity if that story happened in today's time. Salfen recalled language in the opening that the film is not a prophetic statement, and that Christ's work on earth is sufficient. Kennedy called that framing beautifully said.

> *"I've never seen a modern nativity story, but just hearing Jimmy's heart behind it and his passion to impact for God's kingdom." (Aspen Kennedy)*

SET AS FAMILY

Plenty of people grow up dreaming of being in a movie, then discover that a working set is not always fun. *God With Us*, Kennedy said, actually was.

"It was so much fun. The cast, it felt like a family." He traced that feeling to generous leadership and to working alongside people he had looked up to for years. Gregory Alan Williams, who plays Dr. Amos, stood out. Kennedy had watched him on *Greenleaf* through college. On set he saw those veterans work with excellence and humility at the same time.

That combination, he said, created an atmosphere where the cast could have fun, learn, and dive into the script. For a young actor carrying a role as central as Junie, that kind of room matters.

THE HALLWAY WHEN THE LIGHTS WENT OUT

Asked whether there was a moment on set when he looked around and felt glad he had said yes, Kennedy offered a story that was less about glamour than about endurance.

Near the end of the film, Junie is in a hallway speaking life into Mary Anne and encouraging her. In the middle of that take, all the production lights went out. It was extremely late at night after twelve-hour days. Everyone was tired.

Kennedy remembered thinking the blackout was the opposition they had to push through, because this was probably going to be one of the moments that impacts people. The company went into prayer, asking God to help them past the fatigue so they could still deliver the message.

"I'll never forget that," he said. "Why would the lights all shut off in the middle of a very long take?"

They did it again. That redo, Kennedy said, was the one that made the film. The process stayed fun in his memory, but the lights-out take remains the night he will not forget.

> *"Going into a place of prayer and asking God to still help us and not feel so tired just to deliver this message. And I'll never forget that." (Aspen Kennedy)*

APPLE STORE, ACTING CLASS, AND A SUMMER FILM COURSE

Kennedy's path into the industry has its own random-encounter chapter. He went to Jackson State University as a mass communications major and realized he did not want to be a news reporter. He still wanted to work in television. As a kid he had done print work and modeling. He needed an art elective.

Then a young woman came into the Apple Store where he worked on campus and told him he should take a particular class. It would be good for him, she said. He signed up. The rest, he said, was history. If he could do this for a profession, he wanted to. Fast forward to graduation, he booked his first co-star role, and the work has continued since.

Salfen pointed out that people watching Kennedy's career can find that inspiring, and also that the work is harder than it looks from the outside. What advice would he give someone who wants the same path?

"Man, truly, no pun intended, trust God," Kennedy said. For him it started with prayer. After the class, he knew what he wanted to do. But telling people he was an actor, or that he wanted to be one, with nothing yet to show for it, brought a feeling of inferiority. So he prayed for confirmation.

Less than twenty-four hours later, an email arrived from his professor Bonnie Jackson. She knew he was around during the summers. The school was offering something it had never offered before: a six-week filmmaking course taught by Tim Reid. Kennedy grew up watching Reid on *Sister, Sister*. He had prayed the day before. The next day his professor reached out about a film course that had never been offered.

"Okay, God, that had to be you," he remembered thinking.

That pattern, he said, has been the course of his journey. If a path is for you, God will show it and confirm it. The walk is not easy, but the steward's job is clear: do what is in your responsibility, and leave the rest in God's control.

THE HAIL MARY

Salfen's co-host, Dallas Cowboys great and Pro Football Hall of Famer Drew Pearson, caught the original Hail Mary. On the show they ask guests about the moment when you have to launch it and go for it.

For Kennedy, that moment was a professor in class, Johanns Mouse. What Kennedy remembers clearly is the encouragement. The professor told him that if this was something he wanted to do, he should do it, because he had what it takes.

The weight of that word came from who said it. The professor was a working actor who had worked with Denzel Washington and others. If he said it, Kennedy figured, maybe he should believe it.

"I'm grateful that you poured that word of encouragement because you didn't have to," Kennedy said of that moment. "It meant a lot to me and gave me the confidence to pursue it full time."

In his own shorthand: word of encouragement, got it, ran with it.

FAITH AND THE BRAIN

Mindset is a recurring theme on Salfen's show. What does Kennedy keep in mind to stay on the right path?

Faith, first. But he was glad Salfen mentioned mindset, because he is also deeply interested in neuroscience and neuroplasticity, in how God created the brain to focus and change. He loves emotional-intelligence books as well. Lately he has been diving into neuroplasticity through YouTube TED Talks, then chasing down books on Amazon when a talk points him somewhere useful.

It is another way of talking about stewardship: paying attention to how the mind works, and training it with intention.

EVEN IF IT'S ONE PERSON

God With Us will meet different viewers differently, depending on what they bring into the theater. Kennedy's own favorite character is Walter Moon, played by Rotimi, an atheist trying to disprove everything around him.

Kennedy's hope for audiences lands on that arc. No matter how far someone thinks they are from God, he said, God is willing and able to bring them back into right standing. It takes a moment like Walter's, when he says, "God forgive me," because he just did not know. Over the course of the film, Walter's life and heart soften.

"I just want somebody's faith to be increased, even if it's one person," Kennedy said. "Truly."

The timing feels right to him too. The film opens on darkness and protests, a world that can feel further down a hard road than it should. Holidays are coming, Thanksgiving and Christmas among them, and Kennedy believes the culture needs this kind of message now.

> *"I just want somebody's faith to be increased, even if it's one person." (Aspen Kennedy)*

WHAT THE PREMIERE CROWDS SAID

Feedback has already started. After the D.C. premiere, people came up to say the film really touched their hearts, or that they cried in their seats. One man Kennedy remembers came all the way from New York. He did not say much, but Kennedy could see the emotion behind his eyes. What he did say was simple: as a man, he really needed this.

Kennedy was grateful just to be part of that experience. He expects more people will arrive with one set of expectations and leave with a different takeaway, and he is excited to see what resonates.

Seeing his face on the poster among those names is its own kind of milestone. "I'm really grateful, man. Truly grateful," he said.

NEXT UP: NASCAR

Before wrapping, Salfen asked what comes after *God With Us*. Kennedy is filming a NASCAR television series, playing a NASCAR driver. For now, though, the assignment he wants audiences to take is simpler: see this film, and see it on the big screen.

God With Us opens in select theatres nationwide November 13, 2026. For Kennedy, Junie's story is inseparable from the prayers that got him into the hallway when the lights failed, into the Apple Store conversation that led to an acting class, and into a summer course that confirmed a calling. The hope he carries into opening weekend is modest and large at the same time: that somebody's faith would be increased, even if it is only one person.

FIND *GOD WITH US*

Film: *God With Us* (2026)

Directed and written by: Jimmy Jenkins

Starring: Ashley Olivia Fisher as Mary Anne Thomas; Aspen Kennedy as Joseph "Junie" Love; with Rotimi (Walter Moon), Gregory Alan Williams (Dr. Amos), Roger Guenveur Smith, Ashley Rios, Clifton Powell, Lil Rel Howery

Distributors: Blue Harbor Entertainment and Variance Films

Theatrical release: Select theatres nationwide, November 13, 2026

Website: godwithusmovie.com

Interview conducted by Paul Salfen for AMFM Magazine.

Paul Salfen is Managing Editor of AMFM Magazine and a veteran interviewer of film, television, music, and sports figures. He is the author of Going For It!, a collection of Hail Mary moments from the artists and athletes he has spent two decades putting on the record.