



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

An Introduction to Discussing the Show

---

## Watching *Joan of Arcadia*

An introduction and series overview

At a recent Presbyterian adult education class participants viewed a portion of the CBS drama *Joan of Arcadia*. One member shouted out, “Wow, there’s some great theology in that scene!” He seemed surprised. Regular viewers, though, are not.

Each week on the show we get a new “sighting” of God through the eyes of 16-year-old Joan Girardi, an average girl with average problems—keeping her grades up, having crushes on boys and fighting with her two brothers.

Joan, however, receives not-so-average “visitations,” much like stories told about the historical Joan of Arc. God hasn’t yet asked *Joan of Arcadia* to lead her nation into battle, but has given concrete instructions such as get a job in a bookstore, learn chess, or try out for the cheerleading squad. The instructions don’t make sense at the time, but by the end of the show viewers can see that of course God had a plan and Joan was an important part of it.

*Joan of Arcadia* brings up more theological questions than it answers. Joan wants to know why God won’t intervene to heal her brother so he can walk again. She wonders if God will make her “burst into flames” if she doesn’t do what God asks.

Barbara Hall, the producer, is straightforward about some of these questions. Hall says God (on the show, at least) will not defy physical law (that is, no miracles), will not be “owned” by any one religion, and won’t force Joan to follow God’s instructions.

Since the show has captured the imagination of so many, *Presbyterians Today Online* is posting a mini study guide to the series as a follow-up to a review in the print magazine (January/February 2004 issue). Christian educators and youth ministers may adapt the study guide for their groups. Families may watch the show together and talk about it afterward using the guided questions. The questions are also designed for personal journaling.

Our objective is to apply the principle of inquiry—asking important questions for analysis, evaluation and reflection—to *Joan of Arcadia*. We will begin with a general overview and set of questions, and add study guides for specific episodes as they become available.

Study guides for episodes that are reruns will be posted a few days before the show airs. Study guides for new episodes will be posted the week after the show.

Note to discussion group leaders: You may want to tape new episodes for later viewing and discussion using the study guide questions. Be aware that showing more than short clips from recent episodes in a church or other public setting is a violation of copyright law.

We hope the questions we ask about how God operates in *Joan of Arcadia*’s television world will generate more questions and lively discussions of how God lives and moves in our world.

## Series overview

Joan Girardi begins to see God, who shows up in a number of different guises. She comes to trust these sightings and usually follows through—or attempts to—on what God asks her to do. Part of the intrigue of the show involves Joan keeping her “gift” a secret.

Joan’s warm and supportive family is important to her. Her mother is an art teacher at her high school and her father is a law enforcement officer (he begins the series as police chief, but that status changes over the first half of the first season). Joan’s older brother Kevin was partially paralyzed in an auto accident and uses a wheelchair to get around. Her younger brother Luke is a science whiz and the “voice of reason” among the Girardi children.

“Religious” is not a word Joan would use to describe herself. There are few references to church or a religious community in *Joan of Arcadia*. When religious leaders appear on the show, they are usually not helpful, which leaves Joan pretty much on her own with God.



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

An Introduction to Discussing the Show

Introduction—page 2

## For the discussion leader

Show a few clips from the series (or if you have time, view an entire episode) and ask the following questions:

- What is the nature of God as God appears here?
- What are some of God's characteristics?
- Compare the image(s) of God shown in this clip or episode with images of God found in the Bible.
- How does Joan really know who is God and who is not God? How do we know whether something in our life is from God?
- In this clip or episode, does Joan do what God asks? What is the result?
- Besides conversations with God, what are some ways God's love and care are shown to Joan?
- The idea that God shows up in Joan's life anytime, anywhere and in any form supports one of Reformed theology's basic tenets: that God is ruler of the universe and will do whatever God deems best. In this episode, how is the rule of God portrayed?

*Teresa Blythe, author of these study guides, is a spiritual director who writes about religion and popular culture. She is a member of St. Mark's Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz. She also edits the "Critics' Corner" department in Presbyterians Today. If you use this study guide, please tell us about your experience. Contact Teresa Blythe (e-mail: [tblythe@jps.net](mailto:tblythe@jps.net)).*

*Presbyterians Today grants one-time only permission to churches, schools, and other not-for-profit entities to reprint these study guides if fewer than 100 copies are planned and all copies are distributed free of charge. No resale of this material is permitted and reprints may be used for educational purposes only.*

To subscribe to *Presbyterians Today*, the denomination's award-winning magazine, call 1-800-558-1669 or visit [www.pcusa.org/today](http://www.pcusa.org/today).



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

Season 1, Episode 1

(First aired September 26, 2003)

## “Pilot”

By Teresa Blythe

If God appeared to you one day—in human form—and asked you to do something like get a part-time job at a bookstore, what would you think? What would you do? This pilot episode of *Joan of Arcadia* asks us to consider those questions as we watch a teenage girl, Joan (from the fictional Maryland town of Arcadia), receive visitations from God.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures God not only speaks to individuals but appears to them in a variety of forms, many times human. Sometimes these forms are called angels (see Jacob’s dream in Genesis 28:10-22), but many Biblical scholars believe people in ancient Israel considered angels to be human representations of God. Jacob wrestles with a figure (Genesis 32:22-32) that tells him he has “struggled with God.” Moses gets to see the “backside” of God (Exodus 33:20-22).

Christians look to Jesus as the human incarnation of God, and Jesus speaks of himself as being one with the Father (John 10:30). Although Christians believe Jesus to be the ultimate image of God, divine visitations did not stop when Jesus left this earth. In the 15th century a young Christian woman, Joan of Arc, began to receive revelatory “voices” from God giving her instruction and comfort.

So hearing voices or conversing with God is nothing new. Yet in our day we are likely (with good reason) to be skeptical of people who boldly claim God told them to do something. We have seen religious visions turn violent and ungodly.

All of this is what makes the premise of *Joan of Arcadia* so fascinating. It gives us an opportunity to discern—by watching, evaluating and discussing—what we believe is and is not realistic in these portrayals of God.

## Episode-in-a-nutshell

A cute guy approaches 16-year-old Joan Girardi at school and tells her that he is God. To prove this, he tells her a lot of things about herself that she has never revealed to anyone. God tells Joan he is going to be checking in with her from time to time, asking her to do a few things. Her first task is to get a job at the Skylight bookstore.

Joan convinces the testy owner of the bookstore to hire her, and she happens to stumble across the classic book *Lives of the Saints* and reads about the historical Joan of Arc, who also talked with God. Leaving the bookstore, Joan is approached by a man in a car. She at first thinks this is another appearance of God, but when he lunges at her she runs away.

Joan’s father, police chief Will Girardi, is investigating a serial killer who is after young women. While Joan is telling her dad about the creepy man outside the bookstore, police officers bring that same man into the station for running a red light, mouthing off to officers and resisting arrest. His muddy footprints in the police station are all it takes for officers to discover that he is the serial killer—and the man who sped away when Joan resisted his attack.

Helen Girardi, mother to Joan, Luke and Kevin, is concerned about Kevin’s attitude toward work. Kevin is in a wheelchair after a serious motor vehicle accident that rendered him paraplegic and unable to accept an athletic scholarship at the University of Arizona. Helen tries to convince Kevin to at least get a driver’s license so he can look for work. When Joan takes the bookstore job Kevin begins to think seriously about working since he is older and out of school.

Joan comes to believe that God’s request for her to work at the bookstore was God’s way of using her to encourage Kevin to work. And possibly to help catch a serial killer.

## Questions for discussion

“Pilot”—page 2

- The title song for this series is the hit that asks, “What if God was one of us?” Do you ever stop to think how God might look or act or what God might say if God was a person sitting right next to you? What are the advantages of thinking of God in this way? What are some of the drawbacks?
- Would you have reacted as Joan did if a person came up to you and claimed to be God? What questions might you ask such a person in order to verify their claim? What would it take for you to believe the person talking to you was, in fact, God?
- Cute Guy (God) tells Joan that God’s requests are “not about religion, but about fulfilling a destiny.” How is God assisting Joan in “fulfilling her destiny”? What is your destiny? Are you living up to your potential? How do you assess that?
- Do the portrayals of God in this episode ring true to you?
- Consider the conversation Joan has with Cute Guy (God) outside her school. Is that portrayal of God similar to the one Jesus taught? What parts of it are similar? What parts of it are different?
- Are a variety of images of God helpful to you? What are your favorites?
- Read the story of Jacob’s dream in Genesis 28:10-22. What was the purpose of the angels appearing to Jacob?
- Read the story of Jacob wrestling with a divine figure in Genesis 32:22-32. Was this figure God? What was the purpose of the wrestling match?
- Jesus told his disciples that “he and the Father were one.” How do you understand that statement?
- What was God’s purpose for Joan when God asked her to get a job at the bookstore?
- If people don’t get clear-cut visitations from God, how do we know what God is asking us to do? How do you figure out what God’s desire for your life is?

*Teresa Blythe, author of these study guides, is a spiritual director who writes about religion and popular culture. She is a member of St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz. She also edits the “Critics’ Corner” department in Presbyterians Today.*

*Presbyterians Today* grants one-time only permission to churches, schools and other not-for-profit entities to reprint these study guides if fewer than 100 copies are planned and all copies are distributed free of charge. No resale of this material is permitted and reprints may be used for educational purposes only.

To subscribe to *Presbyterians Today*, the denomination’s award-winning magazine, call 1-800-558-1669 or visit [www.pcusa.org/today](http://www.pcusa.org/today).



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

Season 1, Episode 2

(First aired October 3, 2003)

## “The Fire and the Wood”

By Teresa Blythe

Joan confronts God’s mysterious ways when God asks her to “do better” by enrolling in Honors Chemistry, a class she shows little aptitude for. Joan also gets an opportunity to ask Little Girl (God) for a miracle, to “make Kevin walk,” which God refuses to do.

Little Girl/God: I put a lot of thought into the universe. I came up with the rules. It sets a bad example if I break them. Not to mention, it shows favoritism. Why should one person get a miracle, and not everybody else?

God asks Joan to fulfill her true nature—another way of saying God wants us to be fully ourselves. The Psalmist says to God: “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than the angels, and crowned them with glory and honor” (Psalm 8:4–5).

Each of us has to figure out what being crowned with God’s glory and honor means. Christianity teaches us that prayer, Bible study and listening to the deepest yearnings of our hearts all contribute to bringing out our truest nature.

### Episode-in-a-nutshell

Will (Joan’s father) investigates an arson-homicide that entangles him in a touchy political situation resulting in the arrest of the town’s fire chief.

Joan befriends Adam Rove in her advanced chemistry class and discovers he is an accomplished “found-object” sculptor. Adam, whose father is the night janitor for the Police Department, finds out about a car with hand controls available at the impound, and the Girardis are able to get it for Kevin (Joan’s older brother).

God tells Joan her role in life now is to be a catalyst—someone who does God’s will on a small scale and makes things happen for good (as in the case of meeting Adam, who helps get Kevin the car). As Joan talks with the Mime (God), she sees that, as God says, “even the smallest catalyst can lead to mind-boggling reactions.” And, God says, it’s all for “infinite good in an infinite universe.”

### Questions for discussion

- Little Girl (God) makes a strong statement about miracles in this episode (see the quote above). In effect she says miracles only occur within the boundaries of nature’s rules—rules that God set up and maintains. How do you understand miracles in today’s world? How do you understand the miracle stories in the Bible?
- Read the story of Jesus healing a paralyzed man in Luke 5:17-26. After reading this story, reflect on Joan’s request of God to “make Kevin walk.” Was Joan out of line asking for this miracle? Did Jesus “break the rules” of the universe when he healed the paralyzed man? Did Jesus show favoritism? How do you make sense of the stories of Jesus’ ability to heal and cure sick people?



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

“The Fire and the Wood”—page 2

- God asks Joan to fulfill her true nature. What do you think is your truest nature? How do you find that out? What spiritual practices do you follow in order to stay true to the person God created you to be? How do they help?
- Joan finds out her role is to be a catalyst. What small actions have you taken that you have discovered to have far-reaching effects? In our success-oriented culture, how can we become more attuned to being faithful in small actions even when we cannot see where they are leading?
- Joan told Principal Price that God advised her to take the Honors Chemistry class. He reacted as if that statement were either a joke or a sign that Joan was mentally ill. When we believe God has spoken to us, how can we express that to people without getting a “Principal Price” reaction? Do other people’s reactions to our faith statements matter? Why or why not?
- Read Psalm 8. What does it mean that humans are created “a little lower than the angels”?
- Joan is told by God to “have some pride.” Yet, we have also heard that pride is considered one of the “seven deadly sins.” When is pride a sin, and when is lack of pride a sin?

*Teresa Blythe, author of these study guides, is a spiritual director who writes about religion and popular culture. She is a member of St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz. She also edits the “Critics’ Corner” department in Presbyterians Today.*

*Presbyterians Today* grants one-time only permission to churches, schools, and other not-for-profit entities to reprint these study guides if fewer than 100 copies are planned and all copies are distributed free of charge. No resale of this material is permitted and reprints may be used for educational purposes only.

To subscribe to *Presbyterians Today*, the denomination’s award-winning magazine, call 1-800-558-1669 or visit [www.pcusa.org/today](http://www.pcusa.org/today).



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

Season 1, Episode 3

(First aired October 10, 2003)

## “Touch Move”

By Teresa Blythe

The game of chess holds richness for Joan as she learns to “play her own game, not her opponent’s.” In a broken and chaotic world it is easy to become tossed around, reacting to situations rather than boldly acting on our own convictions and beliefs. For Joan, this means standing up to a clique of girls who want to label her friend Grace because they think she is a lesbian.

God encourages Joan to learn chess, after which a chess master/God teaches her a little about cause and effect in chess—and life.

For Joan’s mom, playing her own game means deciding for herself if she is going to believe in a miracle that would allow Kevin (paralyzed in an auto accident) to walk. Helen gets little support from the people around her, yet she persists in believing that Kevin might be in the “2 percent” of people with serious spinal injuries who regain use of their legs.

In the Gospel according to Luke we read of another woman who was not content to play her opponent’s game. The widow who pestered the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8) refused to lose faith. Jesus says God grants justice to those who are bold and persist in crying out to God.

“Touch Move” invites us to think about whose game we are playing in life. Is it our own—the one God has placed before us? Or is it the world’s?

## Episode-in-a-nutshell

God tells Joan to learn to play chess. She finds the Chess Club in the basement of the school (with God’s help) and unexpectedly beats the school champ in six moves. In a game with God, Joan is told to always think before she moves. “Whatever you do, don’t play the other person’s game. Play your own.”

Helen hopes Kevin’s leg pain means he might regain the use of his legs one day. She visits his doctor, only to be told there is only a slight chance of that happening. She asks the local priest in the parking lot if it is wrong to pray for personal miracles. Will (her husband) tells her to give up on the idea of a miracle, saying, “God is not going to come down and fix it” for them.

Will investigates the case of a missing boy and is forced to use a psychic, who asks him if he is hostile toward her because of “the tragedy” in his life. When the psychic meets Joan, she notices that Joan “has a special connection to the universe.” She also whispers to Kevin that he will “dance at his wedding.”

Some gossiping girls at Joan’s school want Joan to find out if her lab partner, Grace, is a lesbian. Joan takes the bait and asks Grace a series of leading questions about boys. Grace figures it out and tells Joan that her sexuality is none of Joan’s business. The chess conversation with God makes Joan realize she needs to stand up to the gossipmongers and tell them what Grace told her—people’s sexual preferences are not her concern.

## Questions for discussion

- The Chess Club advisor says chess teaches us “the greatest maxim in life—even when things are going badly for us we do not lose heart.” What steps do you take to not lose heart when things are going badly for you?



- Read the parable of the widow and the unjust judge in Luke 18:1-8. After reading this, how would you answer Helen’s series of questions (addressed to the parking lot priest): “Is it wrong to pray for personal miracles? I was taught you don’t ask God for specific things. There’s this one thing I really want. Is it wrong? Can it do harm to pray for something you want?”
- God tells Joan, “It’s a causal universe. Actions have consequences and to be in denial of that is to be disengaged with the laws of the universe, which renders you powerless and vulnerable to an inordinate amount of pain.” In what ways do human beings try to deny that actions have consequences? What role does God’s mercy have to play in a causal universe?
- The parking lot priest answers Helen’s question about praying for a miracle by saying, “Prayer can never hurt, as long as you understand you may not recognize the answer right away. Most miracles occur in hindsight.” What miracles-in-hindsight have you observed? Have you ever prayed for something and not seen the answer right away? What are some ways we can develop patience in prayer?
- Helen’s parting shot with the priest is, “Why don’t I ever feel better after I talk to you?” Is it the job of a priest, minister or spiritual advisor to make us “feel better”? Why or why not? Is it your opinion that the priest in the scene with Helen did a good job of answering her questions? What is your feeling about his insistence that she come to his office one day to talk with him?
- The psychic that Will did not want to work with was right about a few things and wrong about a number of other things. Do you believe there are people with psychic powers? If so, how are their gifts best used?
- Joan’s younger brother Luke explains that perhaps psychics simply understand the “game of life” better than most of us, and can see “several moves ahead,” much like chess players visualize future moves. If you could see “several moves ahead,” how might your life be different?

*Teresa Blythe, author of these study guides, is a spiritual director who writes about religion and popular culture. She is a member of St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz. She also edits the “Critics’ Corner” department in Presbyterians Today.*

*Presbyterians Today* grants one-time only permission to churches, schools, and other not-for-profit entities to reprint these study guides if fewer than 100 copies are planned and all copies are distributed free of charge. No resale of this material is permitted and reprints may be used for educational purposes only.

To subscribe to *Presbyterians Today*, the denomination’s award-winning magazine, call 1-800-558-1669 or visit [www.pcusa.org/today](http://www.pcusa.org/today).





# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

Season 1, Episode 4

(First aired October 17, 2003)

## “The Boat”

By Teresa Blythe

While walking down the high school hallway with her chemistry class partner, Grace, Joan finds a wallet filled with cash. When she returns it to its owner, a naval recruiter, she learns that he's God—who surprises her by telling her to build a boat.

One of the most important tasks we can be about is finding our calling in life—calling being that place where, to paraphrase theologian Frederick Buechner, “our deep desire meets the world's deep need.” Joan finds hers in the unlikely work of boat-building. When she builds her boat, she is exhilarated and fulfilled.

Joan's calling comes directly from an encounter with God. It is not the first time we hear of God calling a young person to do something important (or asking someone to build a boat!). Jeremiah, the great prophet of the Hebrew exile, was approached as a young man and given his task (Jeremiah 1:1-10). Rarely do we get as clear a message from God, though, as Joan and Jeremiah. Finding our calling is usually more a convergence of prayer, listening to Scripture, listening to our hearts, and trial and error.

People sometimes erroneously assume a calling means a lifelong vocation in a helping profession. But callings can be, as Joan discovered, simple everyday tasks for a specific time. After watching this episode, think about what your particular “calling” from God is this week.

### Episode-in-a-nutshell

God instructs Joan to “build a boat.” She pretends it is a school project and begins building a boat in her garage, finding that—as she puts it—“I'm brilliant at it.” Helen (her mother) fears Joan is becoming “eccentric” because she's so happy building the boat. When God starts talking to Joan through her radio, Joan says she wishes her talent were not boat-building but helping the people she loves get along. God tells her to appreciate her gift because “everything that rises must converge.”

Kevin attends a wheelchair basketball practice but refuses to play after he is flooded with memories of playing high school basketball before his paralyzing accident. He becomes distraught about the changes he has been through and throws his school yearbook in the fireplace. Kevin doesn't perk up until he goes into the garage and sees what a mess Joan made of her boat. Kevin fixes it up, and in watching him work Joan realizes why God wanted her to build a boat in the first place.

Will investigates the shooting death of a police officer. The troops want a task force because another cop was killed in a similar matter not long ago. Will refuses to appoint a task force, saying that two murders do not make “a pattern.” In fact, one of the murders turns out to be the result of a domestic dispute and the other a ritual killing.

### Questions for discussion

- Have you ever had an urge to do something out of character only to find out later it was just what someone else needed you to do? Did you consider the urge to be God's way of communicating with you?



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

“The Boat”—page 2

- Read the story of God commanding Noah to build an ark (Genesis 6:9-22). How is it similar to Joan’s command from God? How is it different?
- Consider the call of Jeremiah as a young man (Jeremiah 1:1-10). What is God’s command? What is God’s promise?
- If you think of God’s call to you as the place where “your deep desire meets the world’s deep need,” what do you feel called to do this week? In the next few years? What kind of person do you feel called to be?
- Recall how energized Joan was as she built her boat. When have you ever felt that kind of work energy? What activities bring out the “divine energy” in you? What gives you life?
- Whenever we go through great changes in life—as Kevin has—we experience grief for what we have lost or left behind. How do you express your grief? Your frustration with change? For Kevin, God’s comfort came in the gift of the badly constructed boat. How does God meet you in your grief?
- God tells Joan “everything that rises must converge,” which is another way of saying “all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). What creative new energy is rising in you? What are some of the ways it might converge and work for good in the world?
- When Joan asks God (the Old Woman) if she is “popping in” just to check up on her, God tells Joan, “I don’t pop—I abide. I’m eternal. No popping.” What does it mean to say that God “abides”? What does it feel like in your life—does God abide or does God seem to “pop in” now and then?

*Teresa Blythe, author of these study guides, is a spiritual director who writes about religion and popular culture. She is a member of St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz. She also edits the “Critics’ Corner” department in Presbyterians Today.*

*Presbyterians Today* grants one-time only permission to churches, schools, and other not-for-profit entities to reprint these study guides if fewer than 100 copies are planned and all copies are distributed free of charge. No resale of this material is permitted and reprints may be used for educational purposes only.

To subscribe to *Presbyterians Today*, the denomination’s award-winning magazine, call 1-800-558-1669 or visit [www.pcusa.org/today](http://www.pcusa.org/today).



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

Season 1, Episode 5

(First aired October 24, 2003)

## “Just Say No”

By Teresa Blythe

Harboring a secret can be a heavy burden. In this episode we learn that Joan’s mother, Helen, was raped in her dorm room as a college student. It is a secret she has revealed to Will, her husband, but not to her daughter, telling herself she is waiting until Joan is old enough to understand. Then God tells Joan to have a yard sale, bringing Helen’s grief to a head when she has to face artifacts from her past.

Violent crimes, like rape, can tear families apart. In the Biblical family of King David there is the horrifying story of a rape—the rape of Tamar by her brother Amnon (2 Samuel 13:1-22). Not only did the rape make Tamar “a desolate woman” for the rest of her life, it had ramifications for the entire family, and ultimately for the throne of Israel.

In “Just Say No” we see the courage it takes to confront a secret, not with a sense of revenge as in David’s family, but with love and devotion, walking through the grief so that healing can take place.

### Episode-in-a-nutshell

God tells Joan to have a yard sale, which she does even though almost no one in her house wants to let go of any of his or her old junk. Helen, particularly, gets upset when Joan discovers and tries to sell two dark paintings that Helen created when she was in college. The paintings were part of Helen’s healing process after a devastating rape—something that Helen has never told Joan. Will persuades Helen to tell Joan about the rape.

Will is confronted by an angry Arcadia rape victim who wants justice. Her case is clouded by the fact that she knew the rapist and she had consumed alcohol the night of the rape. One of Will’s detectives doctors a file to make the case more favorable to the victim, and Will fires him for doing so.

Kevin meets the newspaper reporter interviewing his father for a story and falls into a fact-checking job at the newspaper.

### Questions for discussion

- Why do you think Will felt it was important for Joan to know about Helen’s experience of rape? How was the secret affecting the family? Describe some scenes illustrating the effects of the secret on the family.
- Read the story of the rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13:1-22). Is this story new to you? If so, why do you think it is rarely talked about? What are some of the different ways David’s family is hurt because of this one act of violence?
- Read Ephesians 4:15. How does Joan’s family live out Paul’s advice for us to “speak the truth in love” in this episode?



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

“Just Say No”—page 2

- Housewife (God) tells Joan that people often see Her, they just don't notice Her. How can we better hone our ability to notice God? Where, in your life, do you see God or evidence of God?
- Housewife (God) also tells Joan that God doesn't care much about time. How is God's time different from our sense of time? What are some ways we can better become attuned to God's sense of time? Is time something we need to be concerned with? Why or why not?
- Housewife (God) reminds Joan that, “whenever I ask you to do something, it's in your best interest.” How does our image of God affect how we understand God and God's demands? Do you believe that what God asks of you is really in your best interest? If so, how did you come to that belief? Why do you think so many people believe in a taskmaster or police officer type of God? What is your favorite image of God?
- Joan becomes infatuated with a charming but shifty young man, Clay, in this episode. Why does Joan seem to think God gets in the way of her “personal life”? What were the red flags about Clay that you, the viewer, might have detected that Joan overlooked?

*Teresa Blythe, author of these study guides, is a spiritual director who writes about religion and popular culture. She is a member of St. Mark's Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz. She also edits the “Critics' Corner” department in Presbyterians Today.*

*Presbyterians Today* grants one-time only permission to churches, schools, and other not-for-profit entities to reprint these study guides if fewer than 100 copies are planned and all copies are distributed free of charge. No resale of this material is permitted and reprints may be used for educational purposes only.

To subscribe to *Presbyterians Today*, the denomination's award-winning magazine, call 1-800-558-1669 or visit [www.pcusa.org/today](http://www.pcusa.org/today).



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

Season 1, Episode 6  
(aired January 30, 2004)

## “Bringeth It On”

By Teresa Blythe

Quality or quantity? When it comes to friends, Joan finds out which is more important. God asks Joan to try out for cheerleader, which puts her in a new circle of popular girls but alienates her from her older friends.

This episode captures some of the tension that exists among teenagers who want to fit into a social group or class at their high school. Joan’s dilemma is a fleeting desire to be popular, even though it turns her current friends off. In her role as cheerleader-wannabe, Joan extends her compassion to a troubled cheerleader and serves as a prophetic voice against shallowness.

To discuss this episode with your family or a small group, you might videotape and watch the entire episode together. Then use the questions listed at the end as discussion starters.

### Episode-in-a-nutshell

On advice from God, Joan tries out for the cheerleading squad, even though she is neither prepared nor interested. She is clumsy and careless, but she still makes the first cut in tryouts and becomes friendly with the two captains of the squad.

Will Girardi (Joan’s father and police chief of Arcadia) investigates the discovery of an abandoned newborn found alive in a dumpster, wrapped in a high school gym bag. The investigation leads him to Joan’s school, where speculation runs rampant as to which girl might have delivered and abandoned the baby.

Brianna, one of the cheerleading captains, is discovered to be the mother of the abandoned baby. This news ends Brianna’s popularity and forces her to a different school. Joan stops to talk to Brianna outside of school on Brianna’s last day.

Joan: Are you OK?

Brianna: You’re the only one who’s asked me that. You’re the only one who’s talked to me at all. Cece and the others just walked by like they didn’t even see me. (Crying) They did see me.

A righteously indignant Joan takes a parting shot at the popular crowd in final tryouts, with this cheer:

*Go Eagles, Go Eagles, GO GO GO Eagles!  
We live to cheer, we’re so sincere,  
unless you get in trouble—then we’re outta here.  
Cause it’s such a royal pain when a friend gets arrested.  
How could I have known?  
How could I have guessed it?  
It’s not like she’s my sister. Whoops! Was that my beeper?  
And even if she was, am I my sister’s keeper?  
Sorry, gotta go, tryouts are today.  
Tell her we’ll think of her every time we say,  
Go Eagles! Go Eagles! Go Go Go Eagles!  
My name is Joan, this cheer is my own,  
so kiss my feathers cuz this bird has flown!*

## Questions for Discussion

- God makes some strange requests of Joan, such as “try out for cheerleader.” But Joan does have the advantage of actually seeing and conversing with God. And she seems to know when it is God appearing to her. Without such sightings, how do you know when God is making a request of you?
- Does seeing God and talking with God make it easier for Joan to follow God’s ways?
- In this episode’s story, what do you think God wanted to accomplish through Joan by having her try out for cheerleader?
- What are the writers saying about God and the ways of God in this episode?
- When the substitute teacher (God) chides Joan for “turning on her friends,” Joan snaps back by asking if God doesn’t have more important things to care about. Joan’s concern is, in fact, one concern some critics of the show have missed. Why do you think the tasks God gives to Joan are usually directed at solving some personal, individual problem when the world has so many larger problems with social and economic injustice?
- In this episode God appears as a homeless man, a substitute teacher, and a man dressed in a hot dog suit. How do you imagine God might appear to you if God wanted to get your attention? Why?
- What are some ways Joan becomes “the face of God” to others in this episode?

*Teresa Blythe, author of these study guides, is a spiritual director who writes about religion and popular culture. She is a member of St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz. She also edits the “Critics’ Corner” department in Presbyterians Today.*

*Presbyterians Today* grants one-time only permission to churches, schools, and other not-for-profit entities to reprint these study guides if fewer than 100 copies are planned and all copies are distributed free of charge. No resale of this material is permitted and reprints may be used for educational purposes only.

To subscribe to *Presbyterians Today*, the denomination’s award-winning magazine, call 1-800-558-1669 or visit [www.pcusa.org/today](http://www.pcusa.org/today).



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

Season 1, Episode 7

(First aired November 7, 2003)

## “Death Be Not Whatever”

By Teresa Blythe

“Pay attention to behavior.” God asks Joan to be on the lookout for people who need her help, even when they do not know how to ask for it. As Joan does this, she discovers how fragile humans beings are—and how painful it can be to reach out to them in love. Joan must confront her feelings about death after learning about a 6-year-old friend’s terminal condition.

Cute Guy (God): Joan, there’s nothing I could say about (dying) that would make sense to you.

Life is difficult, and Joan’s anger with God about this fact is shared by many of us, especially when we are confronted with situations in which innocent people suffer. The book of Job in the Hebrew Bible centers around the question of what our human response should be to what Joan refers to as “God’s system.” In the New Testament Jesus teaches the difficult notion that God “sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45). In the case of Job, the recommendation is silence in the face of a God of mystery and awe.

In the end God tells Joan that the real pain in life—hell, as it were—is to try to “go it alone.” God instructs her to head home because “people are waiting for you.”

### Episode-in-a-nutshell

It’s “Career Day” at Arcadia High School, and while browsing at the booths, Joan meets a perky Flight Attendant (God), who makes a distinction between career (which Joan is not ready to think about) and work. “Work,” the Flight Attendant says, “is a spiritual exercise” in which we help one another. God’s directive is for Joan to “pay attention” and look at human behavior because “not everyone knows how to ask for help.” Shortly afterward Joan spots a woman on the bus crying because her baby sitter just quit. Joan offers her services as a baby sitter and meets Rocky, a boy obsessed with death, disaster and statistics about life expectancy. Rocky, she discovers, has a severe case of cystic fibrosis and is not expected to live to adulthood.

Will (Joan’s father) is embroiled in a controversy as two of his white police officers are videotaped beating a suspect who is black. The investigation leads Will to conclude that the officers were in no way justified in the use of such force, and that racism was a key factor in the beating.

While Will is distracted by the investigation, Helen (Joan’s mother) secretly consults a priest about her crisis of faith as a result of her son’s paralyzing accident. The priest suggests that she may be stuck in a stage of grief, much like the stages described by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her classic book *On Death and Dying*. Helen is encouraged to talk with her husband—regardless of how busy he is—about her anger and sadness around Kevin’s loss of mobility.

Adam Rove (Joan’s good friend) is morose because it is November. Joan later finds out, while visiting a graveyard with Rocky, that Adam’s mother died in November a few years ago. Joan pops in on Adam to apologize for not “paying enough attention” to his feelings.

### Questions for discussion

- In this episode God tells Joan that “work is a spiritual exercise.” Do you consider all the work you do to be a spiritual exercise? Why or why not? What would make your work more meaningful for you?





# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

“Death Be Not Whatever”—page 2

- The priest that Joan’s mother meets with encourages her to consider the many “deaths” we experience in life—not just those in which a loved one technically dies. What loss was Helen grieving? What are some times in your life when you experienced a loss that felt like a death?
- Rocky is the first person Joan has ever told about her visions of God. What seemed to be her motivation for telling Rocky she had seen God?
- Rocky repeatedly tells Joan that death is nothing to be afraid of. How was Rocky facing his own mortality? How do you come to terms with your mortality? In what way is your faith helpful in this matter? What aspects of faith sometimes get in the way of accepting our death?
- Helen tells Will that her usual stance of gratitude and optimism had “stopped working for her.” How does the absence of gratitude and optimism sometimes work in our favor? Have you ever experienced what felt like a loss of God’s presence in your life? How might that feeling of emptiness lead us to new understandings of God?
- When Jesus says God sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matthew 5:45), what do you think is his point? How are we to pray about the “rain” in our lives in light of this passage? How are we to respond to the “rain” in our lives in light of this passage?
- Joan tells God how angry she is, and God doesn’t seem surprised or annoyed. Do you express your anger at God? What makes you angry with God? If you were in Joan’s situation, would you be angry with God?
- God tells Joan that “love generates a lot of power.” Do you think humans understand how powerful the force of love is? What are some examples of how love generates power? What are some examples of how we underestimate that power?

*Teresa Blythe, author of these study guides, is a spiritual director who writes about religion and popular culture. She is a member of St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz. She also edits the “Critics’ Corner” department in Presbyterians Today.*

*Presbyterians Today* grants one-time only permission to churches, schools, and other not-for-profit entities to reprint these study guides if fewer than 100 copies are planned and all copies are distributed free of charge. No resale of this material is permitted and reprints may be used for educational purposes only.

To subscribe to *Presbyterians Today*, the denomination’s award-winning magazine, call 1-800-558-1669 or visit [www.pcusa.org/today](http://www.pcusa.org/today).



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

Season 1, Episode 8

(First aired November 14, 2003; rerun April 9, 2004)

## “The Devil Made Me Do It”

By Teresa Blythe

How do we know it is God making a request of us—and not some other spirit? That is what Joan Girardi grapples with in this episode. God wants her to prevent her friend Adam Rove from entering an art show. But to do that Joan has to take some drastic measures, so she begins to wonder about how to discern between God and “the adversary.”

The practice of “discernment of spirits” has been important for Christians down through the ages. In the mid-16th century St. Ignatius of Loyola wrote his “Spiritual Exercises” to give us some tools for discernment. One tool is to consider the outcome, which requires patience on our part. Does the action produce the “good fruit” described in Galatians 5:22-23 (“the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control”)? In Joan’s case, what God desired for Adam was that he not be tempted to quit school by having early success in his art career. Joan’s act of destroying the artwork was not what God requested—and did not produce the “fruit of the Spirit”—but Joan could eventually see the “fruit” in what God had intended.

Still, we are all wise to be like Joan and “test the spirits” to see if they are from God. Her instinct to approach and talk with religious leaders about discernment is a reminder that we discern the Spirit best in community, with help from our elders and friends.

### Episode-in-a-nutshell

God tells Joan to find a way to keep Adam Rove’s sculpture out of the upcoming art show, but God does not tell Joan why or how to do that. First she tries buying the sculpture, but Adam insists on showing it anyway. Joan begins to wonder if it was God who approached her about this sculpture removal. Her second attempt to keep the sculpture out of the show involves trying to steal it, but it is too heavy to move.

Joan continues to question the origin of the request to keep the sculpture out of the show. She speaks with a priest, asking him if it is possible God might ask a person to commit a sin in God’s name. The priest says “no” and tells Joan that would be the act of the “adversary,” meaning a force for evil.

When Joan is unsuccessful in keeping Adam out of the art show, Adam sells his sculpture for \$500. This wind-fall convinces him to drop out of school to pursue his art. At that point Joan believes it was God telling her to keep Adam out of the show.

Finally, in desperation over not being able to talk Adam into staying in school, Joan takes a chair and destroys the valuable sculpture—temporarily ending her friendship with Adam. Joan admits she failed God on this one and tells God she is rather confused.

Power-Walking Woman (God) (talking to Joan): I understand you’re confused. But there are no dilemmas without confusion, there’s no free will without dilemmas, and there’s no humanity without free will.

Will (Joan’s father and police chief of Arcadia) investigates a case in which a homeowner shoots and kills an intruder on the homeowner’s front lawn. The media calls the shooter a “hero,” but Will is not convinced and tells reporters he hopes the case goes to trial.

Kevin and Luke (Joan’s brothers) quarrel after Kevin tries to make a point that store owners feel sorry for him in a wheelchair when they allow him to shoplift small items. Luke’s behavior at the hobby store—offering to pay for the paints Kevin stuffed in his pants—puts Luke in the role of “older brother,” which shames Kevin (the real older brother of the family).

## Questions for discussion

- Rabbi Polonski tells Joan that the Jewish tradition does not really include belief in “the devil” but does believe in human beings’ inclination toward evil. What is the difference between believing in our inclination toward evil and personifying evil? Do you tend to think of evil as a being or an inclination, or both?
- When Joan talks to the priest about whether God would ask her to do something wrong, the priest says that the devil sometimes takes on the “guise of our Lord.” If evil can pose as the Holy Spirit, how do we know the difference? What are some guidelines you might use to know the difference?
- Read Galatians 5:22-23. How are these “fruits of the Spirit” present in your life?
- Joan tells the Power-Walker (God) that she is having second thoughts about Her. God says it is OK to have a crisis of faith, and that it is not really faith if there is no crisis. Have you ever had a crisis of faith? Did you emerge stronger in your beliefs or weaker?
- The Power-Walker (God) says “faith is an act of will, not a feeling.” In what way have you experienced faith as an “act of will”? What acts of will have you taken as a result of your faith? What feelings followed?
- God tells Joan that every new decision is a chance to do the right thing, and that “you don’t get that [chance] from the other side.” What do you think that means? In what way might our evil inclinations box us in? How is what God asks of us different?
- Joan’s act of violence (against the sculpture) was followed by an act of repentance, indicating that she realized she was wrong. At what point do you think Joan knew she was going against God’s will?
- Joan was said to have had a “failure of imagination.” What failures of imagination have you experienced? If you had been in Joan’s situation, how might you have managed to keep Adam out of the art show?

*Teresa Blythe, author of these study guides, is a spiritual director who writes about religion and popular culture. She is a member of St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz. She also edits the “Critics’ Corner” department in Presbyterians Today.*

*Presbyterians Today* grants one-time only permission to churches, schools, and other not-for-profit entities to reprint these study guides if fewer than 100 copies are planned and all copies are distributed free of charge. No resale of this material is permitted and reprints may be used for educational purposes only.

To subscribe to *Presbyterians Today*, the denomination’s award-winning magazine, call 1-800-558-1669 or visit [www.pcusa.org/today](http://www.pcusa.org/today).



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

Season 1, Episode 9

(First aired November 21, 2003; rerun April 23, 2004)

## “St. Joan”

By Teresa Blythe

Joan Girardi, meet Joan of Arc. In this episode the modern Joan develops a fondness for the 15th-century French teenager who wore men’s clothes and led a military force to victory.

One of the greatest gifts from “the communion of saints” who have gone before us is the inspiration we receive when we reflect on their stories. Joan Girardi found the courage to take a stand with her history teacher because of the courage Joan of Arc exhibited hundreds of years ago. In the New Testament letter to the Hebrews, the author recounts the faith of Abraham, Moses, David, Samuel and finally Jesus (Hebrews 11:8-12:12) as sources of strength along our faith journey.

Joan’s stand, however, was not the one God required her to take, reminding us that even though other people’s journeys may inspire us, God wants us to live out our own lives faithfully.

### Episode-in-a-nutshell

The gardener (God) tells Joan to “ace” her next history test, which is about Joan of Arc’s role in the history of the Hundred Year’s War between France and Burgundy. Joan reads about her namesake and becomes fascinated with the young saint’s life and death. As a result she makes an A+ on her history test, which so shocks her teacher and principal that they demand she retake the test, thinking she probably cheated.

Joan protests the unfairness of having to take the test again, but God tells her to “do it the hard way” and take the test again. She repeats the A+ and she reconciles with her teacher, who confesses that Joan’s newfound interest in history is an inspiration to him.

Joan’s family goes into therapy initially to address Joan’s irrational behavior, but this leads to a deep sharing about the tension around Kevin’s accident—which occurred when he went along for a ride with a drunken friend. Kevin admits to the family that the accident was not God’s fault, or the fault of the universe, but that “he did this.”

### Questions for discussion

- How similar is Joan Girardi to Joan of Arc? To learn more about the historical Joan, visit <http://www.funsocialstudies.com>.
- [learninghaven.com/articles/joan\\_of\\_arc.htm](http://learninghaven.com/articles/joan_of_arc.htm) or <http://www.stjoan-center.com/#bio>. What traits—other than believing God is speaking to them—do the two Joans share?
- The historical Joan of Arc reported hearing voices from heavenly personalities other than God—St. Michael and St. Catherine, for example. Do you feel close enough to any Biblical figures or saints to imagine them talking with you?



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

“St. Joan”—page 2

- Which Biblical figures or saints in history do you find most inspiring and why?
- Do you think Joan should have agreed to retake the history test (before God required it of her)? Why or why not?
- Kevin’s outburst in the therapist’s office seemed to break open a wound that no one was admitting to. He describes the emotion around his accident as “the stain on the living room floor.” Have you ever been part of a group that talked around a big problem but tried to avoid talking about it? What was it like? Did that scene portray the kind of tension that you felt?
- Kevin wanted the family to be clear about who was to blame for his being paralyzed in an accident. He especially noted that it was not God’s fault. Is it ever God’s fault when an accident happens? What about a natural disaster? How do you understand the power and presence of God in the midst of daily events?
- Joan’s father, Will, explains in this episode why he reacts negatively to religion, saying it was pushed on him as a child. What are some ways that well-meaning religious people sometimes aggressively push their beliefs on others? What are some effective and non-aggressive ways to share your faith?

*Teresa Blythe, author of these study guides, is a spiritual director who writes about religion and popular culture. She is a member of St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz. She also edits the “Critics’ Corner” department in Presbyterians Today.*

*Presbyterians Today* grants one-time only permission to churches, schools, and other not-for-profit entities to reprint these study guides if fewer than 100 copies are planned and all copies are distributed free of charge. No resale of this material is permitted and reprints may be used for educational purposes only.

To subscribe to *Presbyterians Today*, the denomination’s award-winning magazine, call 1-800-558-1669 or visit [www.pcusa.org/today](http://www.pcusa.org/today).



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

Season 1, Episode 10

(First aired December 5, 2003)

## “Drive, He Said”

By Teresa Blythe

Just how active is God in the world on a day-to-day basis? It is an important question for the series *Joan of Arcadia*, because its creator, Barbara Hall, has vowed that on this show God will not “directly” intervene. Yet, God comes close in “Drive, He Said” as Joan is told to “take a drive in the country” and just happens to rescue her dad, who escaped from a hostage situation.

Even among devout Christians there is disagreement about how God brings about God’s will in the world. Why do some people—as Joan did here—seem to get important messages from God that look, for all intents and purposes, like intervention, and others do not? How is it that in this episode God tells Joan, “I don’t interfere in that way” (after Joan asked if God made her pass her driving test), but God does frequently put Joan in situations that lead to miraculous discoveries or epiphanies?

When these difficult questions come up it is helpful to ponder the mystery of God, always keeping in mind Jesus’ words to Nicodemus, “the Spirit blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes” (John 3:8). What all Christians generally agree upon is that God is at work in the world, and God’s purpose is that all be healed and made whole. Exactly how God does that in specific situations will have to remain a mystery.

### Episode-in-a-nutshell

A desperate gunman takes Will hostage when he pulls a car over at a traffic stop (and absentmindedly leaves his gun in his own car). The gunman orders Will to drive around all day until Will finally rams the car into a pole, allowing him to retrieve the gun and get away from the violent man.

God tells Joan to get her driver’s license—a feat she has failed at before—but this time she succeeds. Then God tells her to go for a drive in the country. While doing so, she sees her father, wounded and in need of help, in the middle of the road.

Helen, Joan’s mother, starts the day with a pregnancy test, which is positive. But Luke (the younger son) finds the test in the bathroom trash can and erroneously assumes Joan is pregnant. By the end of the day Helen finds out she is not pregnant after all. And Luke discovers that Joan is not even sexually active, much less pregnant.

### Questions for discussion

- In your opinion does God directly intervene on Will’s behalf in this episode? Does God indirectly intervene? What is the difference?
- Do you believe God directly intervenes in specific situations in our lives? Have you ever experienced what you believe to be direct intervention from God? How do you believe God interacts with you and your world?



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

“Drive, He Said”—page 2

- Plumber (God) tells Joan, “I’m God. My needs come first.” In the Reformed tradition we would file that line under the essential tenet of “the sovereignty of God,” meaning God alone is the ruler of the universe and will do whatever is best for God and creation. How might our prayer change if we seriously took God’s needs into consideration? What are some of God’s needs? Does the notion of God having needs make sense to you?
- When Joan admits she is afraid to drive because she might hurt someone on the road, Proctor (God) tells Joan that “being an adult means sometimes risking other people’s well-being.” Would you find that statement helpful if you were in Joan’s situation? Why or why not? What kind of risks do you need to take in life? What kind of risks do you need to avoid?
- Read John 3:8. How do you understand the mystery of God? What experience have you had of God’s Spirit “blowing where it chooses”? How can human beings follow the Holy Spirit as it blows?
- When Kevin, Joan’s older brother, was waiting to hear word about his father, he returned to work on his boat. What did the boat symbolize for Kevin? For the family?
- Kevin and his father nurtured a deeper connection in this episode as Kevin waited around to be the first person his father saw when he woke up in the hospital. Why do you think Kevin did that? What did it signify? How can we show love to one another even when we have had arguments or disagreements?

*Teresa Blythe, author of these study guides, is a spiritual director who writes about religion and popular culture. She is a member of St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz. She also edits the “Critics’ Corner” department in Presbyterians Today.*

*Presbyterians Today* grants one-time only permission to churches, schools, and other not-for-profit entities to reprint these study guides if fewer than 100 copies are planned and all copies are distributed free of charge. No resale of this material is permitted and reprints may be used for educational purposes only.

To subscribe to *Presbyterians Today*, the denomination’s award-winning magazine, call 1-800-558-1669 or visit [www.pcusa.org/today](http://www.pcusa.org/today).





# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

Season 1, Episode 11

(First aired December 12, 2003; rerun May 28, 2004)

## “The Uncertainty Principle”

By Teresa Blythe

Crazy as it sounds, God asks Joan to invite the school bully, Ramsey, to the winter dance. No one—including Joan—understands this date.

Goth Kid (God): I wouldn't worry about self-defense.

Joan: Then why the psycho mission? Because I didn't sign up for martyrdom.

Goth Kid (God): Almost everybody has some light, somewhere. And light is always worth fighting for.

Joan asks the school bully to the school's winter semi-formal, per God's request, which results in an evening's worth of events she will not soon forget. So Joan decides to do as God asks: “Listen and observe. Be present.”

This episode illustrates how easy it is for us to write off people we think are frightening or even “evil.” God, however, asks that we show more compassion.

One of the best stories in the Bible about God's mercy toward outcasts is found in the book of Jonah. Like Joan, Jonah did not want the task God put before him. It involved prophesying to a group of people he found distasteful. But Jonah did as God asked and the Ninevites were spared destruction.

How often do we push past our resistance to God's call and act in faith like Joan and Jonah did?

### Episode-in-a-nutshell

Joan, on the outs with Adam, thinks she will pass up the winter semi-formal this year—until God tells her to ask the hostile Ramsey to escort her. Joan does as God says, and in the process gets to know Ramsey's story and develops some compassion for him. The entire winter dance situation ends badly—Ramsey runs from the school after alcohol is found in his suit pocket. Joan chases after him, gets into a truck with him, and ends up taking cover as Ramsey brandishes a gun at police in the dark, secluded hangout where he and Joan are found.

In the standoff with Joan's father Ramsey finally gives himself up for arrest. Joan feels that she failed him, but a visitation from God shows her that had she not spent some time observing and listening to Ramsey, he likely would have gone on a shooting rampage in the school and killed several students. Joan's obedience to God averted tragedy.

Luke, Joan's brother, works with Grace on a science fair project and ends up taking Grace to the dance. She surprises him with a kiss, mostly to catch him off guard and annoy the students who have been assuming that she was a lesbian.

Joan's dad, Will, digs up information about the previous chief of police that could be devastating to the current city administration.

### Questions for discussion

- Goth kid (God) tells Joan not to use the word “evil” lightly. What constitutes evil in your opinion? What are some of the ways Biblical writers have spoken about evil? For some clues, check out:
  - Paul on the dark power of evil in his life—Romans 7:14-25.
  - Jesus as power over evil—Luke 10:18; Matthew 12:28
  - God's help in the face of rampant evil—Psalm 14
  - God's compassion on those who turn from evil—Jonah

“The Uncertainty Principle”—page 2

- God tells Joan just to “listen, observe, and be present” with the troubled Ramsey. How can these actions, which may seem reserved and passive to some, make a difference in a person’s life? Can you recall a time someone “listened, observed and was present” to you when you needed a friend? Why is listening generally received with more appreciation than advice is? Which would you rather have in hard times?

- What are some of the ways Joan “listened, observed and was present” to Ramsey?

- Recall the final conversation between Joan and Older Woman (God):

Older Woman (God): Observation is a more powerful force than you could possibly reckon. The invisible, the overlooked, and the unobserved are the most in danger of reaching the end of the spectrum. They lose the last of their light. From there, anything can happen.

Joan (sighing): OK. Fine, I observe Ramsey. His life is still ruined.

Older Woman (God): His life wasn’t the only one at stake.

- Who are the “invisible, the overlooked, and the unobserved” in your life? How might you grant them the gift of observation?

- Using the analogy of a spectrum of goodness and light on one end and evil and darkness on the other, Goth Kid (God) tells Joan that almost everyone has some light in them, somewhere. In classical Christianity we are taught that we are born into a broken and evil world that is redeemed by the light of Christ. How does this analogy of a spectrum fit into your beliefs about Christ as the “Light of the world”?

- Read the story of Jonah. How are some themes in this story echoed in this “Uncertainty Principle” episode? How was Jonah’s call from God different from Joan’s?

- What is “the uncertainty principle” in physics? If you need help, see the article “Uncertainty About the Uncertainty Principle” in the online magazine *Slate* at [slate.msn.com/?id=2062844](http://slate.msn.com/?id=2062844). In what way does Joan participate in the uncertainty principle, if at all? What connection with the physics principle does the producer of the show seem to want you to make?

*Teresa Blythe, author of these study guides, is a spiritual director who writes about religion and popular culture. She is a member of St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz. She also edits the “Critics’ Corner” department in Presbyterians Today.*

*Presbyterians Today* grants one-time only permission to churches, schools, and other not-for-profit entities to reprint these study guides if fewer than 100 copies are planned and all copies are distributed free of charge. No resale of this material is permitted and reprints may be used for educational purposes only.

To subscribe to *Presbyterians Today*, the denomination’s award-winning magazine, call 1-800-558-1669 or visit [www.pcusa.org/today](http://www.pcusa.org/today).



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

Season 1, Episode 12

(First aired January 9, 2004; rerun May 29, 2004)

## “Jump”

By Teresa Blythe

Where is God in the midst of tragedy? It is a question every person who believes in God faces at one time or another. Joan gets to ask God point-blank, but she finds out that the answer is a mystery,

Creepy Guy (God): I leave hints all over the place. I'm all about hints.

In this episode Joan experiences what Paul describes as “now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face (1 Cor. 13:12). When Joan asked God if she could see “the big picture’ (face to face), she passed out. It was too much for her.

So the deeper question in this episode is, can we live with the mystery of not knowing exactly what God has in store for us in life, in death or life beyond death? And, what kind of ripples will our lives create?

### Episode-in-a-nutshell

Rocky, the terminally ill boy Joan used to baby-sit, dies and Joan must face her feelings about mortality. Joan goes to the funeral and eulogizes Rocky as “pretty much a weirdo” who was obsessed with death and “made death funny. Until today.”

Joan’s thoughts soon turn from Rocky to Adam, who has become increasingly morose. She learns that Adam’s mother committed suicide three years ago, using pills, and Adam has not been the same since. She also discovers that Adam is too afraid to read the suicide note his mother left behind.

God tells Joan that people’s lives create “ripples.” Rocky’s ripples were good, but the ripples from Adam’s mother’s suicide were not. After Adam gains the courage to hear the suicide note, Helen (Joan’s mother) reads it to him, and he is relieved that he was a blessing in his mother’s life and not a stressor that led to her death. Adam and Joan kiss and make up after several weeks of hard feelings over Joan tearing up one of his sculptures (in “The Devil Made Me”).

The city of Arcadia loses its entire government as the FBI investigates a corruption scandal. This leaves Will without a job since the sheriff took over the law enforcement of the town. Will agrees to become a beat cop—quite a demotion—in order not to uproot his family again and to avoid a boring desk job.

Luke and Grace create a science fair project together, building a strange moving projectile that accidentally destroys the project Friedman and Glynis proudly created.

### Questions for discussion

- Creepy Guy (God) tells Joan that he is all about hints. Have you ever received a hint from God? How did you know it was a hint? How did you know it was from God? Where do you generally look for hints from God?
- Are hints from God enough for you? Has there ever been a time when you needed more clarity than you might get from a hint? Have you ever gotten more than a hint from God?

“Jump”—page 2

- Read 1 Corinthians 13:8-13. What are your feelings about only knowing “in part” in this world? How comfortable are you with the mystery of God? With the mysteries of life and death?
- Read Matthew 18:15-22 about resolving disputes. Compare Joan’s apology with those instructions. How does Joan demonstrate her forgiveness and love for Adam? Is there an “Adam” in your life—someone you have hurt and want to reconcile with? How does asking for forgiveness create “good ripples” even if the apology is not accepted?
- Why was it important for Adam to read his mother’s suicide note? If you were Adam, would you have wanted to read the note? Why or why not?
- Regarding his mother’s note, Adam tells Joan (he calls her Jane), “I tried all night, Jane. I couldn’t do it. I can’t go out into the cold .... I need some kind of warning.” Who do you turn to when you need strength to do something hard? Why do you think Adam turned to Helen, Joan’s mother, instead of Joan for the reading of the note?
- How did the actor who plays Adam use body language to portray the changes in Adam’s life as a result of hearing the comforting words in the suicide note? Describe what you saw and how you interpreted his body language. How good are you at reading your friends’ or family members’ body language? In what ways can body language be even more accurate than a person’s words? (Describe a situation.)
- Why do you suppose that, in this episode, Joan is not given any tasks by God to complete? Do you believe God is as “task-oriented” as this show usually depicts God? Is God more interested in what we “do” than in who we “are”?
- This episode introduces the notion of God’s interest in the “ripples” we produce in the world—a notion that resurfaces from time to time in the series. What kind of ripples do you think your life creates? If you were to ask someone who knows you well, what might they say about your “ripples”? What are some ways we might allow God to transform our negative ripples?

*Teresa Blythe, author of these study guides, is a spiritual director who writes about religion and popular culture. She is a member of St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz. She also edits the “Critics’ Corner” department in Presbyterians Today.*

*Presbyterians Today* grants one-time only permission to churches, schools, and other not-for-profit entities to reprint these study guides if fewer than 100 copies are planned and all copies are distributed free of charge. No resale of this material is permitted and reprints may be used for educational purposes only.

To subscribe to *Presbyterians Today*, the denomination’s award-winning magazine, call 1-800-558-1669 or visit [www.pcusa.org/today](http://www.pcusa.org/today).



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

Season 1, Episode 13

(First aired January 16, 2004; rerun June 3, 2004)

## “Recreation”

By Teresa Blythe

“Every now and then you gotta take a break and re-create,” says Cute Boy (God) while dancing with Joan. God says recreation is not about relaxing, but about starting over.

In the first creation story in Genesis, God creates the world and then rests on the seventh day (Genesis 2:1-3). Sabbath—a day of renewal and rest—is a gift from God as well as a commandment (Exodus 20:8-11). God tells us to take a break because our minds, bodies and souls cannot take a constant diet of work.

The chaotic scene at Joan’s party and Will’s unwillingness to stop thinking about work while he is at the spa illustrate just how “out of sync” our modern definitions of recreation are with God’s idea of Sabbath. Neither Joan nor her dad could find the serenity needed to “create again” with God.

### Episode-in-a-nutshell

Will and Helen get away for a spa weekend, leaving Joan and her brothers home alone with the edict of “no parties.” God tells Joan, “have a party—that’s what kids do!” So Joan throws a house party that naturally gets out of hand. The police get called on a noise complaint at the Girardi house, which takes them away from surveillance of a meth (methamphetamine) lab. The lab blows up while the police are sending the party kids home. As the cops watch the news of the meth lab on TV, they realize that if they had not responded to the noise complaint, they might have been hurt or killed in the explosion.

Joan’s relationship with Adam is strained. He shows his affection for her, but she pulls away, not quite sure “what they have together.”

The parents turn out to be bad spa visitors—with Will punching out an obnoxious guest and Helen screaming at Will because he can’t handle “quiet time.”

Kevin becomes even more attracted to his editor, who offers him an opportunity to write essays for the newspaper.

### Questions for discussion

- Different people enjoy different ways of recreating. Will and Helen try a spa. Joan tries a party. What is your favorite way to take a break? Why do you think God told Joan to have a party?
- What do you think of God’s definition of “recreation”—to begin again and to redefine? What does Joan feel she needs to redefine in this episode? What part of your life needs re-creating? Redefining?
- Why do you think Cute Boy (God) said recreation is not about relaxing? How are the two concepts different? How are they related?



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

“Recreation”—page 2

- Read the end of the first creation story (Genesis 2:1-3). What does the Biblical writer mean when he says God “blessed and hallowed” the day of rest? Do you take a Sabbath? If so, how is that day different from the other six days of your week? Do you stop all work, or just some kinds of work? If God were to talk with you about a Sabbath or “recreation” as God did with Joan, what might God say to you?
- Jesus was known to do some healing and other work on the Sabbath. Read Luke 6:1-11. What does Jesus say about the Sabbath? What social and religious customs does he challenge? What is the result? How do you balance the good that needs to be done on the Sabbath with the need for rest?
- Will has a hard time relaxing at the Willow Hills Spa and Well-Being Center. Joan is too uptight hosting her party to enjoy herself. What seems to be in the way of their efforts to relax? What gets in your way when you try to relax?
- Many times God tells Joan to do something that results in a lifesaving situation for another person. In your life and experience, have you seen God work in that way?
- Joan breaks her parents’ rule about “no parties” when God tells her to have a party. If God asked you to do something that you knew was against the rules, would you have any problem doing it?

*Teresa Blythe, author of these study guides, is a spiritual director who writes about religion and popular culture. She is a member of St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz. She also edits the “Critics’ Corner” department in Presbyterians Today.*

*Presbyterians Today* grants one-time only permission to churches, schools, and other not-for-profit entities to reprint these study guides if fewer than 100 copies are planned and all copies are distributed free of charge. No resale of this material is permitted and reprints may be used for educational purposes only.

To subscribe to *Presbyterians Today*, the denomination’s award-winning magazine, call 1-800-558-1669 or visit [www.pcusa.org/today](http://www.pcusa.org/today).



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

Season 1, Episode 14

(First aired February 6, 2004)

## “State of Grace”

By Teresa Blythe

How do we find our true voice in a world full of competing voices? Joan joins the debate team to find out—responding to yet another directive from God that makes her temporarily unpopular with her small circle of friends. Yet as she finds her own strength and ability to speak she encourages others to do the same. This episode emphasizes that we discover our voice by taking risks, speaking our truth, and then evaluating the fruits of the experience.

Joan’s mom, Helen, also struggles to “find her voice” as the artist and teacher she once was, struggling with all the reasons why she shouldn’t apply for the Arcadia High art teacher’s job. After watching Joan speak so bravely on the debate team, Helen decides to focus on her true desire and overcome the many obstacles.

The quest to have a strong voice—and be a voice for God—has Biblical roots. The most striking case is God telling Moses to speak to the people and Moses replying, “I have never been eloquent ... but am slow of speech and slow of tongue” (Exodus 4:10-17). God then appoints his brother Aaron to do the public speaking, with Moses as the mouthpiece for God. This story is echoed in this episode with Joan elected by God to “read what [her debate partner] wrote.”

Making good choices continues to be a prominent theme in this series. Joan, annoyed with God’s constant reference to how our choices matter, brings up a key aspect of spiritual discernment, noting that we only know if our choices are the right ones in retrospect. The Security Guard (God) defends that as a “perfect” system, but Joan is not so sure.

### Episode-in-a-nutshell

God tells a reluctant Joan she’ll be “an excellent addition to the debate team.”

Security Guard (God): What, a lively exchange of ideas in search of the truth? Who wouldn’t love that?

Joan: Uh, me.

Joan’s new extracurricular activity annoys Grace and strains their friendship.

Grace: Chess, cheerleading, now debate team. There are easier ways to bring pain into your life.

On the debate team Joan is paired with Scott, a bright young man with a severe stuttering problem, and they are given the task of arguing in favor of the school’s new and much-hated metal detectors. Turns out, Scott is an excellent writer and Joan persuades him that journalism is a better outlet for his “voice” than the debate team. Joan finds her voice on the debate team as she taps into her passion and anger about the daily dangers her father has to face on the police force.

Will (Joan’s father) investigates a case in which a minister is beaten, presumably because he is gay. As Will questions the young man whose father attacked the minister, the facts fall into place. The young man is gay, and the minister was beaten because he told him that God loved him “no matter what.”

Joan’s friend Grace heckles her pro-security stance at the formal debate, and Joan abandons her speech in a passionate plea for simply “figuring something out” that will make high schools safer. After the debate Joan believes she has lost one of her few true friends. God meets Joan outside the school just after the debate:

Security Guard (God): Do you know what grace is, Joan?

Joan: Yeah. Pissed off.





# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

“State of Grace”—page 2

Security Guard (God): Do you know the meaning of grace? It’s a touch of truth that lets you see the world in a new way. It’s a gift that can only be felt when you’re open enough to accept it.

Grace follows God and admits to Joan, “I should have thought about you.”

Helen debates the merits of applying for the job just vacated by the art teacher. In the end, however, Helen (who had been asked by her boss to select the best applicants) removes all applications but her own from her boss’s desk.

## Questions for discussion

- God shows up in this episode as a Security Guard, Computer Girl, and Butcher. Yet there may also be scenes in the show where the presence of the invisible God can be detected. What scenes in this episode depicted the movement of the God that we cannot see?
- God keeps reminding Joan that our choices in life are very important. But Joan complains that we don’t know if we’ve made good choices until after the fact. How do you know if you have made a good choice? What criteria do you use to evaluate your choices? Do you expect God to lead you to the “right choice” in every situation?
- Joan’s mother listed many good reasons for not applying for the art teacher’s position at the high school. Yet she decides to apply for the job anyway. How do you discern your life’s path at those intersections where there are good reasons for going in either direction?
- In *Joan of Arcadia* God primarily challenges Joan to do things—cheerleader, debate team, chess team—that are not natural choices for her. Yet many people believe God shapes us and intends for us to use our most natural gifts and follow our deepest desires. Which approach would work best with you? Why?
- God’s definition of grace in this episode is, “A touch of truth that lets you see the world in a new way. It’s a gift that can only be felt when you’re open enough to accept it.” Is that how you would define grace? What are some ways a person can cultivate openness to grace?
- When Will complains about violence done in the name of God, his co-worker, Toni, says “it’s not about God.” Can religion and religious teachings ever be held responsible for violence done in God’s name?
- This series rarely depicts a community of faith, but does portray ministers from time to time. In this episode, a minister was attacked for befriending a young gay man. What did this portrayal of a “man of God” say about the community of faith that he represents?

*Teresa Blythe, author of these study guides, is a spiritual director who writes about religion and popular culture. She is a member of St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz. She also edits the “Critics’ Corner” department in Presbyterians Today.*

*Presbyterians Today* grants one-time only permission to churches, schools, and other not-for-profit entities to reprint these study guides if fewer than 100 copies are planned and all copies are distributed free of charge. No resale of this material is permitted and reprints may be used for educational purposes only.

To subscribe to *Presbyterians Today*, the denomination’s award-winning magazine, call 1-800-558-1669 or visit [www.pcusa.org/today](http://www.pcusa.org/today).



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

Season 1, Episode 15

(First aired February 13, 2004)

## “Night Without Stars”

By Teresa Blythe

Facing up to our “dark side” is painful, as several members of the Girardi family find out in “Night Without Stars.” In Joan’s case jealousy tempts her to break the rules at her volunteer baby-sitting job, after the lead volunteer, Iris, takes up with Joan’s friend Adam.

Joan: The way I felt about Iris—it was so ugly. Why did you put those feelings in me?

Little Girl (God): Everyone has a part of themselves they don’t like, Joan. You carry it around like a weight. The lucky ones realize that when it becomes too heavy, you can choose to set it down. That’s when you can see things the way they really are.

This episode is reminiscent of the many sibling and romantic rivalry stories in the Hebrew scriptures—Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Sarah and Hagar, Rachel and Leah—they all remind us how easy it is for even the best of us to succumb to jealousy. In the mid-16th century John Calvin would point this out as proof of the “total depravity” of the human—not in the sense that we are completely hopeless, but in the sense that every one of us has a dark side that rears its head when we’re not looking.

At the end of this episode, the Little Girl (God) stretches out her hand and offers to walk Joan home, a fitting image of a God who walks us through the pain of those dark moments when we see ourselves as we really are.

### Episode-in-a-nutshell

“I want you to work with children. Volunteer charity work. Looks good on the resume,” God says to Joan at her brother’s wheelchair basketball game. Joan obeys and signs up to use art therapy with children whose mothers are victims of domestic violence. She gives up a concert date with Adam to keep to her volunteer schedule, only to mess things up by allowing the kids to build and beat on a piñata—something Iris, the regular high school volunteer, would never allow because of bad memories of being hit by her father.

Joan becomes jealous as Adam falls for Iris, and at the first opportunity asks God to get in the way of Adam’s date with Iris.

Hippie Dog Walker (God): Don’t you think there might be some things that are more important than this date?

Joan: Like?

Hippie Dog Walker (God): Like, I suggest that you keep working with those kids.

Joan: (laughing) You suggest. Like I’m not going to do what God suggests. Why am I working with them?

Hippie Dog Walker (God): Sorry, gotta go.

Will (Joan’s father) develops an increasing anger-management problem, snapping at a basketball fan, his police partner, and his wife. When he pulls a gun on a small child while searching a crack house, he is asked by his supervisor and partner to seek psychological help.

Kevin (Joan’s older brother) takes a risk and explores a sexual relationship with Rebecca.

Seeing Kevin get his confidence back, Luke (Joan’s younger brother) becomes resentful because Kevin has started picking on him again—just like he did before the accident that left Kevin partially paralyzed.

## Questions for discussion

- Joan asks why God put feelings of jealousy in her. But God doesn't answer the “why” part of the question. Why do you think God avoids explanations whenever Joan asks for them? Does God “put” ugly feelings in us, as Joan seems to think?
- Little Girl (God) tells Joan that we can choose to let go of the parts of us that we don't like. Has that been your experience with your “dark side”? Can you let it go, or do you need help? How free are we to choose to “let go” of sin and darkness?
- The Hippie Dog Walker (God) tells Joan he has more important things to do than grant her request to mess up Adam's date with Iris. Does God ignore our prayers if they are petty or self-serving?
- Joan continues to act like she is being forced by God to do certain things and God keeps telling her that she is free to say “no.” Why do you think Joan goes along with God most of the time? Is she afraid not to? Is she developing trust? Or is she curious to see how it will all turn out if she obeys?
- Portrayals of God in Joan of Arcadia continue to be playful and clever—almost as if God takes on the role of a trickster. What is your experience of the playful side of God?
- Has Joan developed a loving relationship with God? In what ways has God shown (or not shown) God's love for Joan? In what ways has Joan shown (or not shown) her love for God?
- Have the portrayals of God so far this season been well-rounded? Is there an aspect of God that has not been shown? If so, how would you portray that missing aspect of God?

*Teresa Blythe, author of these study guides, is a spiritual director who writes about religion and popular culture. She is a member of St. Mark's Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz. She also edits the “Critics' Corner” department in Presbyterians Today.*

*Presbyterians Today* grants one-time only permission to churches, schools, and other not-for-profit entities to reprint these study guides if fewer than 100 copies are planned and all copies are distributed free of charge. No resale of this material is permitted and reprints may be used for educational purposes only.

To subscribe to *Presbyterians Today*, the denomination's award-winning magazine, call 1-800-558-1669 or visit [www.pcusa.org/today](http://www.pcusa.org/today).



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

Season 1, Episode 16

(First aired February 20, 2004)

## “Double Dutch”

By Teresa Blythe

Joan comes face-to-face with the indignity and complexity of poverty when God tells her to jump rope with a homeless teenage girl. As she learns to jump Joan also learns about the social and cultural differences between the “haves” like her, and the “have-nots” like Casper. God’s task increased Joan’s compassion but left her feeling powerless to “fix” the situation of a friend who was a casualty of economic injustice.

### Episode-in-a-nutshell

An off-key guitar-playing God says, “Learn to jump rope,” so Joan jumps into a rocky friendship with a group of African American girls in the park who “double-dutch” jump every afternoon. Joan gets to know Casper—who lives in a homeless shelter because her father is away looking for work. Joan’s politically radical friend Grace tells her how to “subvert the system” by stealing a utility bill for Casper so she will have an address and can attend Arcadia High School. When Joan gets caught and confesses the truth about Casper to her family, they arrange for Social Services to help Casper. But it is too late. When Joan goes back to the park Casper is gone—but God is hanging around, this time as a young double-dutch jumper:

Joan: I wanted to help her. Get her a place. Get her dad a job.

Double-Dutch Girl (God): You can’t fix everything, Joan.

Joan: She’s my friend. I want to know what’s happened to her.

Double-Dutch Girl (God): I know you do. But sometimes it’s enough to plant the seed, walk away, and let the flower grow on its own.

Will (Joan’s father) takes Luke (Joan’s brother) to the police station to shadow him at work for a day, but Will pawns Luke off on the CSI lab instead of giving him the opportunity to see him crack four cold cases by painstaking paperwork. Will, not cleared to do street work because of post-traumatic stress problems, is embarrassed about his desk job and afraid Luke will be bored. Luke, however, is angry that he did not get a chance to see his father crack the cases.

Kevin (Joan’s older brother) gets an assignment to profile an attractive music therapist and ends up on a date with her, upsetting his current girlfriend. In his defense, Kevin says the flirtation made him feel like a “regular 19-year-old guy” instead of a disabled person.

### Questions for discussion

- This is the first episode in the series to seriously highlight issues of poverty. The Hebrew prophets and Jesus frequently spoke about poverty and economic justice. How does God’s task for Joan (to connect with Casper) compare with what the prophets of ancient Israel and Jesus had to say about poverty? (See Amos 2; Micah 3; Luke 16:19-29.)



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

“Double Dutch”—page 2

- The Pizza Delivery Guy (God) urges Joan to make a connection with Casper, even though it is hard for both Joan and Casper to do that. In what ways does Joan connect with Casper? In what ways does Casper connect with Joan? What are some of the ways people push each other away in order to avoid connecting?
- Joan complains in this episode that God is stingy with helpful information. Can you think of examples in the Bible where God or Jesus gave people unusual tasks without explaining why?
- Does Joan need to know why God is telling her to do things like “learn to jump rope?” Why or why not?
- In this episode Joan is not able to see a positive outcome as a result of following God’s will. God tells her, “It’s enough to plant the seed, walk away, and let the flower grow on its own.” What experiences in your life have been like that? Have you ever done what you believed was God’s will and not been able to see how your actions affected an outcome?
- God did not mention having a problem with Joan stealing the utility bill to help Casper have an address so she could attend Arcadia High. When, if ever, is it acceptable to “subvert the system” to help a person in need? Was what Joan did right? Why or why not?

*Teresa Blythe, author of these study guides, is a spiritual director who writes about religion and popular culture. She is a member of St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz. She also edits the “Critics’ Corner” department in Presbyterians Today.*

*Presbyterians Today* grants one-time only permission to churches, schools, and other not-for-profit entities to reprint these study guides if fewer than 100 copies are planned and all copies are distributed free of charge. No resale of this material is permitted and reprints may be used for educational purposes only.

To subscribe to *Presbyterians Today*, the denomination’s award-winning magazine, call 1-800-558-1669 or visit [www.pcusa.org/today](http://www.pcusa.org/today).



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

Season 1, Episode 17

(First aired February 27, 2004)

## “No Bad Guy”

By Teresa Blythe

Will and Helen (Joe Mantegna and Mary Steenburgen) both experience situations in this episode that hurt and anger them.

Joan discovers one reason to leave vengeance to God is that it is too easy for humans to make a complete mess of the enterprise. “No Bad Guy” explores human anger and the desire for revenge, even in cases—such as the elderly man who mistakenly hits the car accelerator instead of the brakes and runs into a crowded market—where no ill intent is involved.

After being humiliated by a camera-phone photo taken of her undressing in the locker room, Joan wants to do something mean in return. The Exchange Student (God) reminds Joan that “vengeance is mine” (Deuteronomy 32:35 and Romans 12:19). But Joan gets another lesson about this later from a human—a classmate she defends against the phone-wielding bullies, who she later discovers is a Quaker.

Quaker Girl: I can’t hit back, so I play music.

Joan: Why can’t you hit back?

Quaker Girl: I’m not allowed. I’m Quaker.

Joan: Oh. Wait, like oatmeal?

The Quaker girl is following God’s law of “not returning evil for evil” without the benefit of having God appear to her in person, giving her that command. The conversation also leads into a discussion about Joan’s religious background. She says her parents are Catholic, but she’s not.

Joan’s tech-savvy friends exact revenge on the girls who bullied the Quaker and embarrassed Joan. They download one of the bullies’ private e-mail messages and read it aloud in the cafeteria, only to find out it contains a sad acknowledgment that the writer’s mother has breast cancer. Suddenly, revenge loses its appeal.

Biblical scholars who study the many “revenge passages” in Scripture emphasize that God’s statement “Vengeance is mine” is meant as a reminder that we are not to be avengers. Wanting revenge is natural, but enacting it is stepping on God’s territory. Also, the vengeance of God refers less to a crushing punishment of those who break God’s laws than to a promise of a holy justice coming to put all things right.

## Episode-in-a-nutshell

When a gym classmate takes and distributes an embarrassing photo of Joan in her underwear, Joan and her clique of “sub-defectives” plot revenge. After all, Joan was just defending a friend who was being bullied when she became the victim of the camera-phone. God, this time appearing as an exchange student, tells Joan to forget about revenge and instead join the school band, playing the drums.

Will, Joan’s father, investigates a car accident in which an elderly man runs into a crowd at the Farmer’s Market, killing several people and injuring many more. Helen, Joan’s mother, puts her paintings in an art show, gets a little drunk at her opening, and makes a weak impression on an art critic, who ends up panning the show.

Joan has a heart-to-heart talk with Adam about how she has been mean to him and his girlfriend Iris (whose voice annoys her), and Adam admits he “more than likes” Joan.

## Questions for discussion

- What are some of the different ways people in this episode handled their feelings of rage and desire for revenge?
- Who, in this episode, do you think did the best job of obeying God’s command to abandon revenge?
- In this episode, Joan meets a person her age who listens to God and has faith in God without the benefit of being able to “see” God. What are some ways we listen to an invisible God?
- If Joan “sees” God on a regular basis, is there ever any need for her to pray? Why or why not? Would you pray if God appeared to you in the form of a human?
- Read Deuteronomy 32: 35-42, a poetic “sermon” Moses gives on God’s behalf to the people of Israel. If we believe that God alone is the avenger, what are we to do about people who deliberately hurt us? Where did Joan and her friends go wrong?
- In Romans 12:9-21 Paul talks about the marks of a true Christian. One of these marks is how we treat our enemies. Discuss what Paul says about revenge. How is this passage similar to and different from the passage Paul quotes in Deuteronomy 32:35?
- Joan’s father responds to his feelings of revenge against the elderly driver by chastising the man. Was that a helpful response? Why or why not?
- In this series God frequently leaves Joan by smiling, turning his or her back to her and waving goodbye, as if to say, “It’s in your hands now, Joan.” This view of God’s relationship with humans indicates a good-natured partnership. Do you see Joan’s relationship with God as a partnership? What about your relationship with God? Does thinking of our relationship with God as a partnership mean we see ourselves as equals with God? Why or why not?

*Teresa Blythe, author of these study guides, is a spiritual director who writes about religion and popular culture. She is a member of St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz. She also edits the “Critics’ Corner” department in Presbyterians Today.*

*Presbyterians Today* grants one-time only permission to churches, schools, and other not-for-profit entities to reprint these study guides if fewer than 100 copies are planned and all copies are distributed free of charge. No resale of this material is permitted and reprints may be used for educational purposes only.

To subscribe to *Presbyterians Today*, the denomination’s award-winning magazine, call 1-800-558-1669 or visit [www.pcusa.org/today](http://www.pcusa.org/today).





# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

Season 1, Episode 18

(First aired March 12, 2004)

## “Requiem for a Third Grade Ashtray”

By Teresa Blythe

“Some clarity would help here.” Who among us hasn’t echoed those words of Joan Girardi in relation to God? Joan is told to do more chores around the house, which leads her to conclude that growing up and following God is “a black hole of never-ending worry and responsibility.” In this episode, Joan finds herself overwhelmed with details—at one point mistaking three different people for God—not sure how to make good choices when she’s overextended.

Clerk (God): What are your priorities? Which commitments will you honor?

In a later conversation with Goth (God), Joan admits that growing up “seems so scary,” and God agrees, “it is scary. Fortunately, you’re not alone.”

The notion that God is with us, feeling our fear and frustration, is common in the Psalms. One Scripture that might ring true for Joan—and all people like her who fear growing up—is Psalm 139, an ode to the “inescapable God.”

Where can I go from your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. (Psalm 139:7-8)

### Episode-in-a-nutshell

God asks Joan to help more around the house. So she picks up the missing milk from the store, takes care of a flu-ridden brother, makes a meat loaf, and assists at Adam’s first cafe art show. All in the same evening.

Will (Joan’s father) and his partner Toni are stuck in an elevator with a sarcastic white collar embezzling suspect and a pregnant cleaning woman—who gives birth in the elevator.

Kevin (Joan’s older brother) detects some physical sensation in his gut, and hopes the nerves in his paralyzed lower body are regenerating. Trips to the doctor can’t confirm or deny his theory and he’s told that if his nerves regenerate, he’ll get even more feeling. Later, after a big burrito dinner, he feels “gassy,” a good sign for regeneration.

Grace (Joan’s friend) is cranky because she promised her father, the rabbi, that she would take Hebrew lessons. But she isn’t keen on her friends knowing that she participates in traditional religion.

Grace: And the worst part? I finally gave in thinking I’ll just cause a lot of trouble, you know? Speak out for a Palestinian homeland, just to piss off the teacher. My dad loves it. Says I’m questioning the nature of God in the world, which is exactly in the spirit of the Talmudic scholarship.

Joan: That sucks.

Grace: Tell me about it. There’s no escaping it.

### Questions for discussion

- While flustered, Joan mistakes three people at the cafe art show for God. What are some ways Joan might become more aware of when God is speaking to her ... and when God is not? How could she “test out” an appearance before assuming it was God?

- What happens to your sense of awareness when you are overwhelmed with responsibilities? When that happens, what do you do to calm down?
- Historical records indicate that Joan of Arc spent a great deal of time in prayer even though she heard voices from God now and then. Joan Girardi is sometimes shown talking to herself but rarely in prayer. What would be some reasons for the historical Joan of Arc to pray, even though she heard God’s voice so clearly? How might Joan Girardi benefit from praying during those times when God does not show up?
- When Joan indicated that growing up was scary and wanted God to reassure her, what did you expect God to say? Did you expect God to agree with her? Is the fact that we are not alone reassuring to you? Why or why not?
- Read Psalm 139. What are your feelings about the notion that there is no place to hide or escape from the presence of God? What does the Psalmist mean when he says that God is even found in Sheol (a Hebrew name for the place of the dead)?
- In this episode, Joan accuses God of being “passive-aggressive,” that is, getting one’s own way through emotional manipulation. Is that a fair assessment of how God is portrayed in this series? If so, can you name ways God—in this show—has used subtle manipulation to get Joan to do what God asks?
- Grace is frustrated that even when she thinks she is rebelling against Judaism, her father cherishes her questions—saying they are in keeping with the spirit of Talmudic scholarship. In what way are our questions and doubts about God valuable? How does doubt contribute to faith? Do you question the nature of God in the world? If so, what are some of your questions? If not, what holds you back?
- At the airing of this episode, “Joan of Arcadia” is nearly three-fourths of the way through the first season. So far, is anything missing in its portrayal of God? Is anything missing in its portrayal of family life? What about its portrayal of how humans understand how God works in the world?
- If you have been using these study guides in a group, what have you learned from other people’s responses to “Joan of Arcadia”?

*Teresa Blythe, author of these study guides, is a spiritual director who writes about religion and popular culture. She is a member of St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz. She also edits the “Critics’ Corner” department in Presbyterians Today.*

*Presbyterians Today grants one-time only permission to churches, schools, and other not-for-profit entities to reprint these study guides if fewer than 100 copies are planned and all copies are distributed free of charge. No resale of this material is permitted and reprints may be used for educational purposes only.*

To subscribe to *Presbyterians Today*, the denomination’s award-winning magazine, call 1-800-558-1669 or visit [www.pcusa.org/today](http://www.pcusa.org/today).



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

Season 1, Episode 19  
(First aired April 2, 2004)

## “Do the Math”

By Teresa Blythe

Joan experiences the rejection that comes with being an agent of healing for two older people in her life—people she comes to understand as songs with “missing notes.” When the fallout seems too painful, God reminds her that our lives are like “long songs with many variations” and we play our “missing notes” when the time is right.

In “Do the Math” Joan discovers two secrets. One involves an uncle she didn’t even know she had and the other is the recording career of her grumpy piano teacher.

In her curiosity and compassion Joan attempts to reconcile her father, Will, to his estranged half-brother, Richard. And she helps her piano teacher, Eva, remember and face her past as a concert pianist with crippling anxiety.

The final scene in which Joan talks with the Dog-Walker (God) about her perceived “failure” after her father sends Richard away recalls Jesus’ teaching in the Beatitudes, “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man” (Luke 6:22). A role that seems thankless to Joan now will likely have rewards—or as she might say—“good ripples” in the future.

## Episode-in-a-nutshell

God tells Joan to take piano lessons and points her to a house where a cranky elderly woman advertises lessons. Joan has to dig through her childhood junk boxes to find her former piano lesson books, and in the process finds evidence that her father has a half-brother she didn’t know about. Joan locates Richard and invites him to the house to reconcile with her father. While Richard seems eager to be there, Will asks him to leave.

Joan can’t pay cash for her piano lessons, so she offers to do housekeeping for Eva, her piano teacher, who nurtures both a bad attitude and a drinking problem. Joan finds an album of Bach recordings featuring Eva and realizes that Eva threw her music career away many years ago. When Joan confronts Eva about her talent, Eva tells her about a concert in which she was too nervous to play well. As Joan leaves the house, she hears Eva play the Bach tune that held such bad memories for her.

The title of the episode, “Do the Math,” is a reference to Joan’s inferior math skills, which are strengthened as she learns the connections between math and music. Joan’s music skills also improve, although she could use more grace with fragile, old pianos:

Joan: Yeah, well, you can raise people from the dead, so just wave your hand and fix this stupid thing.

Piano Tuner (God): If you want special effects, rent *Lord of the Rings*.

## Questions for discussion

- Joan seems rude and pushy in this episode, acting as God’s agent. Was her aggressiveness necessary in approaching Eva, the piano teacher? Why or why not? What about in tracking down and inviting Richard to her home?
- Was it ethical of Joan to locate her estranged uncle without discussing it first with her father? Why or why not?

- The Piano Tuner (God) refers to “broken hammers” being the reason we fail to play “all the notes in our song.” When you see people who are broken or miss the mark in some way, how can you look for the reason behind their brokenness?
- What are the “broken hammers” in your life?
- Joan flippantly tells the Piano Tuner (God) that he could just wave his hand and fix the piano. To which God says, “If you want special effects, rent *Lord of the Rings*.” Why wouldn’t God just wave a hand and fix the brokenness in our lives? What are the ramifications of seeking a God of “special effects”?
- The Dog Walker (God) tells Joan that her father will “play his missing note when the time is right.” How willing are you to trust that God’s healing will take place in good time? Can you talk about a time when you or someone you love experienced God’s healing? What was the time frame like?
- When Jesus talks about being “blessed when people reject you” (the Beatitudes in Luke 6:22-23), what do you think he meant? In what ways might Joan feel blessed—either now or later—as a result of following God’s command to take piano lessons?
- In Joan of Arcadia God’s role appears to be primarily that of a catalyst. God gives Joan a task, which leads to a revelation of an even greater task. Can you look at a positive outcome in your life and trace it back to a place where God instigated action from you? What have the “ripples” from that initial action been like?

*Teresa Blythe, author of these study guides, is a spiritual director who writes about religion and popular culture. She is a member of St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz. She also edits the “Critics’ Corner” department in Presbyterians Today.*

*Presbyterians Today* grants one-time only permission to churches, schools, and other not-for-profit entities to reprint these study guides if fewer than 100 copies are planned and all copies are distributed free of charge. No resale of this material is permitted and reprints may be used for educational purposes only.

To subscribe to *Presbyterians Today*, the denomination’s award-winning magazine, call 1-800-558-1669 or visit [www.pcusa.org/today](http://www.pcusa.org/today).



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

Season 1, Episode 20  
(First aired April 30, 2004)

## “Anonymous”

By Teresa Blythe

Like many of us, Joan searches for her “thing” in life—that one talent or gift that makes her special. It is hard to believe that with God our “thing” does not have to be all that unusual or awe-inspiring. Joan finds out that her “thing” is her resilience in the face of failure—trying something, falling down, and then getting back up again.

Peter would be a good role model for Joan. This headstrong disciple of Jesus experiences quite a bit of failure in his life. At Jesus’ arrest, Peter denies even knowing his good friend and leader (Luke 22:54-71). Yet he becomes the “rock” on which Jesus builds the church. Peter refuses to believe a vision in which God reveals that all of God’s animals (and people) are made clean. But when he visits the God-fearing Gentile Cornelius, Peter realizes the Lord does not play favorites (read the whole story in Acts 10). Peter let his failures teach him and point him in a new direction.

### Episode-in-a-nutshell

Joan worries that her budding romantic relationship with Adam will be hampered because she is not an artist (like him and his former girlfriend). God tells Joan to work on the yearbook staff. Joan becomes a photographer—not a very skilled one—and then is fired from that task and given the less prestigious task of taking out the trash. By mistake she throws the poetry submissions out and has to go dumpster-diving to find them.

Joan: It’s disgusting in there!

Custodian (God): Searching for something of value is never easy.

Joan discovers an unsigned poem that is worth publishing. Since the yearbook policy is to only publish signed poems, Joan’s new task is to find the author of the poem. Adam (Joan’s boyfriend) says he recognizes the poem—it was written by their friend Grace. Joan is unsuccessful in convincing Grace to put her name on the poem. But after another talk with God, Joan realizes that just because something is “anonymous” does not mean it cannot be appreciated. She prints the anonymous poem on brightly colored paper and drops copies of it off the roof of the school for all to enjoy.

In other storylines Will (Joan’s father) investigates a case in which a husband is willing to pay a hit man to kill his cheating wife. And Luke (Joan’s younger brother) finds his relationship with Glynis oppressive when she wants to walk through the park but all he wants to do is play video games at the arcade with his friend Friedman.

### Questions for discussion

- Gifts and skills are not the same thing. In “Anonymous” Joan was focusing on learning new skills and overlooking her gift of being an inspiration to her friends. What are your gifts? How do you know what they are? How are your skills and your gifts related? How are they different? In what ways might you value one kind of gift over another?
- Read 1 Corinthians 12:4-11. This passage affirms that each of us has gifts from God that are useful for the common good. In what ways do our religious institutions assist people in discovering and enhancing their many gifts? How could they do a better job?

- In this episode Joan tends to value artistic gifts (photography, drawing, dancing, writing) over less tangible spiritual gifts (listening, supporting, showing kindness, enjoying). What personal gifts do you value most? What gifts are most rewarded in the economic marketplace? What gifts are most needed in our world today?
- Joan gets upset with God when her stint as a photographer does not work out. She wants something that makes her special, to which God replies, “Yes, everyone wants to feel special.” What makes us special in the eyes of God? Do we need to accomplish anything in order to be special? What are some ways people attempt to be special in the eyes of God?
- Joan is consumed in this episode with finding her “thing.” What is your “thing”? How do you know what it is? If you are like Joan and do not know what your “thing” is, how will you go about trying to discover your gift?
- When Joan finds out that her “thing” is staying hopeful and resilient in the face of failure, she is disappointed. How do you cope with failure? Can you think of a time you failed at something, but in looking back at the situation are grateful for what you learned?
- Joan tells Adam she is just a person “digging around in the garbage, trying to find something that matters.” What are some of the valuable things Joan found while working on the yearbook? What do you think God wanted her to accomplish? What was God summoning from Joan in the midst of her struggles?

*Teresa Blythe, author of these study guides, is a spiritual director who writes about religion and popular culture. She is a member of St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz. She also edits the “Critics’ Corner” department in Presbyterians Today.*

*Presbyterians Today* grants one-time only permission to churches, schools, and other not-for-profit entities to reprint these study guides if fewer than 100 copies are planned and all copies are distributed free of charge. No resale of this material is permitted and reprints may be used for educational purposes only.

To subscribe to *Presbyterians Today*, the denomination’s award-winning magazine, call 1-800-558-1669 or visit [www.pcusa.org/today](http://www.pcusa.org/today).



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

Season 1, Episode 21

(First aired May 7, 2004)

## “Vanity, Thy Name is Human”

By Teresa Blythe

How important is personal appearance? In this episode Joan Girardi tests the whole spectrum of appearance—from jazzing up her look with makeup and hairstyles to not caring at all, wearing the same clothes for days and giving up cosmetic enhancements.

In the Hebrew scriptures the word vanity means more than caring about how you look. It describes everything in life that is empty, that we chase after like the wind. The writer of Ecclesiastes (1:2) says, “All is vanity,” a rather bleak view of life. Later in that book, the writer concedes that God’s commandments and God’s ways are what matter in life (12:13).

In our world, many people spend a lot of money and time attaining the perfect body, face and “look.” If God’s ways are all that matter, and if we believe we are created in the image of God, then we must figure out how to present ourselves to the world in a way that glorifies God, much as Joan did after going from one extreme to another. In the end she found her real “look” with freshly washed hair and a clean and simple set of clothes.

### Episode-in-a-nutshell

God tells Joan to take a cosmetics class. When her boyfriend Adam doesn’t notice her enhanced appearance, Joan confronts God—who this time appears as a majorette primping in the bathroom mirror—and asks why she is supposed to take this class.

God: The way the world sees you can change the way you see yourself.

Joan later decides primping is “not who she is” and rejects the media culture’s ideal of beauty. She throws out her fashionable clothes and makeup and stops bathing on a regular basis. Adam still doesn’t notice.

Joan’s mother, Helen, creates a painting that she really likes. A gallery owner likes it, too, and asks for two more along the same lines, to create a series. The stress of having to produce more paintings as good as the original affects Helen’s creativity, so she burns the original painting even though it likely would have sold for good money.

Kevin runs into Beth, the last girlfriend he had before the paralyzing accident, and treats her harshly. He thought she dumped him because he was in a wheelchair. But the truth is, he broke up with her at a party just before the accident and did not remember what really happened afterward. When Kevin figures it out, he apologizes to Beth.

### Questions for discussion

- Joan tells her friend Grace that giving up cosmetics made her feel “like a real revolutionary.” To which Grace says, “Without the bloodshed, social upheaval or CIA involvement.” How revolutionary is it to reject popular culture’s standard for beauty? What would happen if everyone did as Joan did and stopped buying products to enhance their appearance?
- Goth kid (God) tells Joan that he saw to it that “everyone has a ‘best’ feature.” What is your best feature? Is it related to your appearance? If so, what is your best non-appearance-related feature?





# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

“Vanity, Thy Name is Human”—page 2

- How much importance do you think people should place on appearance?
- God tells Joan, “The way the world sees you can change the way you see yourself.” Have you experienced that to be true? In what way? How easy or difficult is it for us to see ourselves as the world sees us?
- Goth kid (God) tells Joan he wanted her to take the makeup class to “observe the effects of appearance.” Do you think Joan accomplished that mission? What did she learn about appearances?
- Joan accuses Adam of being vain because he won’t go to the mall with her (saying he doesn’t like the aesthetics). She says he tries to maintain an image of the sensitive artist. When does maintaining an image become vanity?
- What is your definition of vanity? Read Ecclesiastes 1:1-11. Do you share the writer’s view about life? Now read Ecclesiastes 12. Does the writer accomplish the task to “write words of truth plainly”? Which words ring most true in your life?
- What do you think was Helen’s creative block all about? Would you have destroyed a painting because of the turmoil it caused in your life? Can you describe a time in your life when you felt “some universal force” of creativity flowing through you?

*Teresa Blythe, author of these study guides, is a spiritual director who writes about religion and popular culture. She is a member of St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz. She also edits the “Critics’ Corner” department in Presbyterians Today.*

*Presbyterians Today* grants one-time only permission to churches, schools, and other not-for-profit entities to reprint these study guides if fewer than 100 copies are planned and all copies are distributed free of charge. No resale of this material is permitted and reprints may be used for educational purposes only.

To subscribe to *Presbyterians Today*, the denomination’s award-winning magazine, call 1-800-558-1669 or visit [www.pcusa.org/today](http://www.pcusa.org/today).



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

Season 1, Episode 22  
(First aired May 14, 2004)

## “This Gift”

By Teresa Blythe

When God asks Joan to give Adam a gift—one that helps her get to know him better—she wonders what that means. “Intimacy is never easy, Joan,” says Cute Guy (God). Joan wonders if that means she’s supposed to have sex with Adam, something she doesn’t feel she’s ready for.

It is easy to confuse intimacy with sex. In fact, in the world of television drama, intimacy is frequently portrayed by having the characters become sexually involved. Joan shows considerable maturity in her quest to do what God asks—she talks to Adam about not being ready for sex. In that conversation she realizes Adam needs much more from her than a physical act of love. He needs to be understood and supported in a difficult time in his life. Far more than sex, Adam needs hope for the future.

Paul writes about the gift of love in his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 13). Love, he writes, “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” This is the kind of intimate gift God wants us to give the world.

### Episode-in-a-nutshell

God tells Joan to give her boyfriend, Adam, a gift, but as usual does not elaborate. In her quest to figure out what Adam would like, Joan has a conversation with Rich Woman (God) about this gift:

God: A gift is an offering, a selfless act that adds something to someone’s life. Something that they need. And only the two of you can decide the value of that gift.

Joan: He won’t give me any hints.

God: They’re everywhere, Joan. You should know that by now. Find out what he needs, Joan.

Joan rifles through Adam’s book bag and finds a condom, leading her to wonder if the gift is supposed to be sex. After visiting Adam at the hotel where he has a part-time cleaning job, Joan talks to Adam about the condom (they were handing them out in health class) and finds out he is not all that interested in sex, given his current life situation. Adam confesses that he feels his present job will get in the way of his true work, which is art.

In the end Joan finds a gift that helps Adam feel better about his art. It is a photo of the French artist Rodin, who had to work hard as a bricklayer to support his family while still creating beautiful sculpture. Joan gives Adam the photo for inspiration.

Kevin (Joan’s older brother) covers a court case for his newspaper and becomes outraged at how a robbery convict gets off easy on a plea bargain. He writes a scathing commentary about how criminals are treated better than victims in the justice system, which results in the judge reconsidering and sending the suspect to jail. Will (Joan’s father) had arrested the guy and knew the whole story—the suspect needed money to pay his child support and would have been able to work had he gotten the plea bargain of probation.

### Questions for discussion

- What is the best gift you have ever received from a loved one? What made it special?



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

“This Gift”—page 2

- While Joan searches for the perfect gift for Adam, her younger brother Luke spontaneously buys a crystal formation for his friend Grace. What is your gift-giving style? Do you search for the perfect gift, like Joan? Or do you buy things you see that remind you of a person and give them for no particular reason, like Luke?
- Why do you think Joan wondered if God wanted her to give sex as a gift to Adam? Would that be an assumption you would make if you were Joan and saw the condom in Adam’s book bag? Why or why not?
- Read 1 Corinthians 13. How does Joan’s love for Adam fit the description that Paul gives of the gift of love? What attributes of love do you need to work on in your life?
- In one scene, Rich Woman (God) wears a diamond ring that Joan remarks is worth enough “to end world hunger.” Why do you think the producers chose to portray God as a wealthy socialite here? Is that image of God credible for you? Why or why not?
- Joan snaps that Rich Woman (God) should help Adam believe in himself. “Isn’t faith your department?” asks Joan. God says, “No, it’s yours, Joan,” and implores Joan to pass some of her faith along to Adam. Whose department is faith? God’s? Or ours? How is it that we pass faith along from one person to another? Is it acceptable to ask God for faith? Is faith a gift from God or something we “do” in order to know God better? Or is it both? How do we know?
- In this episode God reminds Joan (again) that God is committed to “the free will thing.” Does God’s commitment to free will in humans mean God never intervenes in our lives?
- Joan tells God that she thinks the commitment to “the free will thing” is a cop-out. Do you believe God is able to intervene in our lives but chooses not to because it might obstruct our free will? If so, is that—as Joan states—a “cop-out” on God’s part?
- In the Reformed Tradition there is the notion that only God is truly free. Theologian Shirley Guthrie writes, “Although we may not like to admit it, honest analysis of our own experience tells us that in the deepest sense, none of us is really free” (*Christian Doctrine*, Revised Edition). In the *Joan of Arcadia* series where is the freedom? With God? Or with Joan? How is the tension between God’s freedom and Joan’s freedom illustrated in this series? How free do you think humans really are? Are people who are addicted to alcohol or drugs truly free?
- Do you believe Kevin obstructed justice when he wrote his opinion about the robber’s plea bargain? Was it proper for his father to grab Kevin’s wheelchair and take him to the jail to show him “the rest of the story”?

*Teresa Blythe, author of these study guides, is a spiritual director who writes about religion and popular culture. She is a member of St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz. She also edits the “Critics’ Corner” department in Presbyterians Today.*

*Presbyterians Today* grants one-time only permission to churches, schools, and other not-for-profit entities to reprint these study guides if fewer than 100 copies are planned and all copies are distributed free of charge. No resale of this material is permitted and reprints may be used for educational purposes only.

To subscribe to *Presbyterians Today*, the denomination’s award-winning magazine, call 1-800-558-1669 or visit [www.pcusa.org/today](http://www.pcusa.org/today).



# Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

---

Season 1, Episode 23 (season finale)

(First aired May 21, 2004)

## “Silence”

By Teresa Blythe

One of the hardest experiences to endure is feeling that God has withdrawn from us. In this episode Joan wavers between doubting her experiences of God and feeling that God has walked away in her time of need. This must be especially hard for someone who has had the advantage of talking with God face-to-face.

Jesus had an experience of abandonment on the cross, when he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). In his torment Jesus was quoting from Psalm 22, a poem that reminds us how common it is to feel “let down” by God. About the best we can do is bear with this experience of God’s absence and not lose hope. Toward the end of the poem the psalmist realizes God “did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.” Just like the psalmist, we can frequently look back on a time of trouble and see that God was with us all along, even when we felt we were abandoned.

Spiritual maturity comes as we endure the dry spells when God feels far away. The Spanish Carmelite priest John of the Cross reinforced this lesson in the 16th century, writing that God sometimes grants these “dark nights” in order to draw us even closer to God. If Joan is to grow in her relationship with God, she will need to be prepared for times when God’s word to her is not so clear-cut.

## Episode-in-a-nutshell

Joan is diagnosed with Lyme disease, a disorder that can cause hallucinations. During her extreme sickness and time in the hospital, she experiences visitations from God, and in one case many different “personas” of God appear at the same time. Then, when Joan gets upset and tells them to leave, they leave the room.

Joan wonders if the Lyme disease is the real source of the visitations, and has been all along. She tells her boyfriend Adam about “talking to God” and, rather than believe her, he tells her honestly that “he believes she believes she was talking to God.” This causes Joan to tell her parents—who are talking about God in her hospital room—that “God is not real.”

Helen and Will individually experience mystical dreams, visions and “knowings” in this episode. Helen has a dream in which God appears as the Cute Boy who has been talking to Joan. Will has a conversation with a woman he later finds out was dead at the time they were talking. Helen visits a church to get closer to God and talks with the priest who approaches her in the mostly empty sanctuary. In their conversation he explains to Helen about “times of consolation and desolation” in our lives (see his definitions below). Helen relates this to Will while they sit with Joan, and Will wonders, “How long does desolation last?” “As long as it needs to,” says Helen.

In the final scene of the show (the season finale), Cute Boy (God) visits Joan while she sleeps and caresses her forehead.

## Questions for discussion

- Read Psalm 22. Does it seem to describe what Joan goes through in this episode? Have you felt the way the psalmist describes in this poem?
- The Lyme disease could be a rational explanation for Joan’s “visitations.” Looking back on the season, could you attribute her conversations with God to a disease? Why or why not?
- How did you feel when the various persons depicting God left the hospital room at Joan’s request? Was God abandoning Joan?

- The Goth Kid (God) called what Joan was going through “the dark night of the soul,” a term popularized by St. John of the Cross, describing a time when a person who usually feels close to God suddenly feels dry and empty—as if God had withdrawn. John of the Cross advises people to not give up hope but to allow the dryness to lead them to greater faith in the mystery of God. What assurances do we have that God is on our side even when we don’t feel God’s presence? What does God’s presence feel like to you? Have you ever felt God’s absence? (To read more about John of the Cross, see *The Story of Christian Spirituality* edited by Gordon Mursell, available from Fortress Press. Especially read the chapter “Catholic Saints and Reformers” by Liz Carmichael.)

- Read the definitions Helen received from the priest concerning the spiritual experiences of consolation and desolation:

Consolation—When things are flowing, and everything makes sense ... and you feel connected ... and you’re aware that God is present and has plans for you, maybe even likes you a bit.

Desolation—When you are scared and confused and alone, and out of step. And your cell phone doesn’t work and your daughter gets sick and the cops come to the door and say there’s been an accident. God retreats and you’re left with your own thoughts. And those thoughts are dark. But there are answers there, the priest told Helen. And strength.

- Using the definition Helen’s priest gave, when have you experienced consolation? When have you experienced desolation? Can you name what caused your desolation to lift? (To read more about consolation, desolation and ways to pray in the midst of both, see *Sleeping With Bread: Holding What Gives You Life*, by Matthew Linn, Dennis Linn and Sheila Fabricant Linn, Paulist Press, 1995, [www.paulistpress.com](http://www.paulistpress.com).)
- What is the significance of the Cute Boy (God) appearing next to Joan’s side while she sleeps, and stroking her head? Does it matter that Joan did not detect his presence?
- What was the purpose of Will and Helen having mystical experiences?
- Was it wise of Joan to reveal to Adam her visitations from God? Why or why not? If you had been Joan and you wanted to tell someone about your experiences of God, who would you tell first? In your own life, who are you likely to talk with about a spiritual experience? Is it important that the person agree to believe you before you tell?
- As you think back over the entire season of Joan’s visitations from God, how has Joan evolved spiritually? How has the portrayal of God evolved or changed?
- Joan speaks often of a “ripple effect” occurring when she does what God asks of her. What kind of ripples do you see emanating from this TV series?

*Teresa Blythe, author of these study guides, is a spiritual director who writes about religion and popular culture. She is a member of St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz. She also edits the “Critics’ Corner” department in Presbyterians Today.*

*Presbyterians Today* grants one-time only permission to churches, schools, and other not-for-profit entities to reprint these study guides if fewer than 100 copies are planned and all copies are distributed free of charge. No resale of this material is permitted and reprints may be used for educational purposes only.

To subscribe to *Presbyterians Today*, the denomination’s award-winning magazine, call 1-800-558-1669 or visit [www.pcusa.org/today](http://www.pcusa.org/today).