



Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

Season 2, Episode 1

(First aired September 24, 2004)

“Only Connect”

By Teresa Blythe

Connecting with God has its ups and downs. When we left Joan Girardi at the end of the first season, she was in a “down time” with God, feeling abandoned. She even told God to go away. As we meet Joan this fall, we find her assenting to the belief that her previous God-visitations were induced by her serious bout with Lyme disease. And she is no longer interested in connecting with God. That, she says, is part of her “crazy phase,” which is over.

Joan: I’m ignoring you.

Young Man/God: I’m used to that.

There’s a classic warning given to many candidates for ordination to the ministry: Make sure your denomination understands that you do listen to the voice of God, but that you don’t actually “hear voices” (because the latter is widely considered a symptom of mental illness). Joan’s question of “am I crazy or am I being divinely visited” is a thoroughly modern one, a function of our understanding of human behavior and psychology. But as God tells Joan in this episode, “Mystery is just part of the deal.”

Many biblical characters had frequent conversations with God. Like Joan, they didn’t always welcome them. Jonah, in particular, comes to mind. Jonah doesn’t want to prophesy to the Ninevites, as God commands, and he ends up in the belly of a fish with time to reconsider. God doesn’t give up on Jonah, and God won’t give up on Joan Girardi either.

Episode-in-a-nutshell

Joan goes back to high school after a summer of therapy, designed to help her recover from the “hallucinations” supposedly caused by the Lyme disease. Of course, God pops up all over the place, even though Joan gives God the cold shoulder. Over the summer Joan’s boyfriend, Adam, did some reading about people who had visions of God and he wants to talk with Joan about how the conversations with God that she told him about might have been real. Joan, however, is determined to stay “not crazy” (as she puts it) and talks about the visitations as a “break from reality.”

God confronts Joan and tells her that she knows she was never crazy and that God was real all long. But Joan tells God that he hurt her and she is not ready to reconnect.

Joan’s mother, Helen, decides it’s time to explore her Catholic roots. She begins a conversation about confirmation with a former nun—a tattooed, smoking, smart-mouthed young woman named Lilly.

Joan’s father, Will, is the target of a lawsuit—emotional distress—filed by the man whose drunk driving accident left Kevin Girardi paralyzed. This turn of events further convinces Will that the universe makes no sense at all.

Questions for discussion

- How has Joan’s relationship with God changed since last season? Has your relationship with God ever been rocky? How so? What needed to happen for the relationship to become smooth again?



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Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

“Only Connect”—page 2

- Joan claims she just wants to feel normal again. Does believing in God make people “abnormal”? If so, in what way?
- God tells Joan that she was never crazy—that “crazy is all about tearing up” and God is about building things up. Why do you suppose Joan cannot accept that and welcome God back into her life?
- Read the story of Jonah in the Bible. How does God interact with Jonah? How does Jonah learn about who God is and what God cares most deeply about?
- If you had spent a summer in psychotherapy because of talking with God, would you react to God in the same way Joan reacted to Little Girl/God in the park? When Joan tells God, “You are not here,” do you think Joan really feels that way? What leads you to your conclusion?
- Helen doesn’t want to tell her family that she’s considering being confirmed as a Catholic. Yet, both Lilly and the priest insist that Helen needs to be more open with her family about her religious pursuit. What are some reasons why Helen is so hesitant to talk about religion with her family? Can you talk about your faith with your family? Why or why not?
- What do you think is driving Helen’s interest in the church? What sorts of questions about God do you have? Who do you talk to about them?
- In one scene Helen holds a rosary—a string of beads with a cross attached—which is used as a guide to reciting traditional prayers. Have you ever used photos, artwork, icons, beads or objects from nature to help you pray? How can holding or reflecting on an object help someone pray?

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.

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Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

Season 2, Episode 2

(First aired Oct. 1, 2004)

“Out of Sight”

By Teresa Blythe

“Keep your eyes open.” After being rebuffed by Joan a number of times, God gives Joan only one task—awareness. It is a simple task, but not always an easy one.

Jesus talked a lot about “having eyes to see” and staying awake to the world around us. He tells his disciples to “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit” to be ready for what God brings to our doorstep (Luke 12:35). For most of the world’s great religions, awareness is the first step in devotion.

One way to cultivate awareness comes from the tradition of St. Ignatius of Loyola (16th century) in which we review our day, week or month on a regular basis and look back in awareness, asking ourselves:

In which experiences did I feel the presence of God most fully?

In which experiences did I feel most distant from God?

When we practice remembering these times of nearness and distance from God, we become more adept at keeping our eyes open in the midst of our daily lives.

Episode-in-a-Nutshell

One of Joan’s summer camp friends, Judith, ends up at Arcadia High encouraging Joan to cut loose and party more. This friendship rattles Adam, since he’s not sure he likes Judith all that much. When Judith is carried off to the hospital after drinking herself unconscious, Joan wonders where it all went wrong. She apologizes to Judith for not taking the bottle away from her at the party.

Will (Joan’s father) investigates a drive-by shooting that neighbors are afraid to talk about. One woman does step forward, and is murdered as a result.

Kevin goes on the offensive with a former friend who is suing for emotional suffering in the accident that left Kevin paralyzed. The friend blames Kevin, for letting him drive drunk.

Questions for Discussion

- Last season, Joan took God at God’s word and pretty much completed all the tasks God gave her. This year, Joan is angry with God and fearful of God’s demands on her. Which Joan is more appealing? Which one seems more real to you? Which Joan seems more like you ?
- The Girardi family had an interesting conversation at the start of the episode about God and God’s role (or absence) in the accident that left Kevin paralyzed. What sort of help do you expect from God in the midst of a tragic experience? Do you see God as a Divine Protector or Divine Companion who supports us in the midst of whatever life brings? Or both? If you were participating in that theological table conversation with the Girardis, what would you have to say?

- Joan’s psychiatrist wants her to understand her sightings of God as signs of mental illness. Yet, Joan continues to see God and talk with God. Do you think Joan should trust the psychiatrist? Can she trust both the psychiatrist and God? How do we know if our experiences of God are real or pathological?
- The guy who caused the accident that left Kevin paralyzed blames Kevin for “not taking the keys away from him” when he was “wasted” (while Kevin was not). Do you believe conflicts can be resolved by placing blame? Was Kevin wise to buck conventional wisdom and try to talk with the young man who is suing his family?
- In this episode, Joan struggles to be “who she wants to be” and “not who everyone else wants her to be.” What are some ways we discover who God created us to be? How do other people’s expectations of us affect our discovery process?
- Joan asks Adam, “Do you know who you are?” He says he doesn’t try to figure it out. Do you try to figure out who you are? Do you think it is an important question?
- God says to Joan “keep your eyes open.” What is the value of simply keeping your eyes open? What does that request end up meaning for Joan?
- At the end of the episode, Joan approaches Old Woman God (in the candy striper uniform) and begins to open up saying, “I don’t want to mess things up.” God gives Joan a warm embrace. How is it that we get the embraces we need from God if God is a Spirit? What feelings did that scene evoke for you?

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Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

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Season 2, Episode 3

(First aired October 8, 2004)

“Back to the Garden”

By Teresa Blythe

The garden is an important image in Jewish and Christian spirituality. There is the garden as a symbol of innocence, the idyllic innocence Adam and Eve experienced in the Garden of Eden before they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2-3). And gardening—or more accurately, agriculture—was one of Jesus’ favorite metaphors for how humans receive and grow from the seed of God’s word (Luke 8: 4-9).

Just as God encourages Joan to plant a garden for a school project, God encourages us to sow seeds of God’s love and compassion wherever we are. The very act of sowing, planting and cultivating is transformative.

Gardener (God): Sometimes when you’re lost, it’s time to cultivate a new place for yourself.

Episode-in-a-nutshell

In a physics experiment on actions and consequences, Joan plants a community garden in the smoking section at her school—to see if it will live. The smokers ridicule her efforts, but the garden manages to grow.

Joan’s attempts to save her friend Judith from running with a wild crowd fail at first. Judith shows little interest in participating in the garden project until the project faces a bulldozer.

Will (Joan’s father) is verbally attacked after an informant in a drive-by shooting case becomes the victim of an arson-murder. Further investigation shows the murder may involve corrupt cops.

Helen (Joan’s mother) meets with her confirmation coach, a feisty former nun named Lilly, to learn more about the Catholic faith.

Against his parents’ wishes, Kevin joins the fight against the lawsuit based on the accident that left him paralyzed. Kevin tells the family he doesn’t want to go through this pain alone.

Questions for discussion

- Read the parable of the sower in Luke 8:4-9. In what way is Joan’s tending of the garden like that story? In what way is it different? Why do you think God was so interested in having Joan plant a garden?
- What does the image of a garden mean in your life? What in your life needs tending? When you think of life being like tending a garden, what is your role and what is God’s role? How well do you take care of your “garden”?
- Joan’s desire to help Judith is admirable, but Judith does not appreciate it. How do you know when to help a friend who seems to be headed in a destructive direction? Why do you think being a helper or trying to “fix” another person many times backfires? Can you think of ways to show a person that you care without trying to “fix” them or their situation?



Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

“Back to the Garden”—page 2

- How would you characterize the relationship that is building between Helen and Lilly? In what way does Lilly draw out helpful responses from Helen? Contrast how Lilly helps Helen with how Joan attempts to help Judith. Who has the more useful approach?
- Joan wanted her garden project to bring her friends together as a community. How was that accomplished? Where do you experience community? What about Christian community? Shirley Guthrie, a Reformed theologian has said, “It’s impossible to be a Christian alone.” What do you think he means by that?
- Helen (Joan’s mother) asks Joan about the “one thing she remembers” from the night of Kevin’s accident. What is the significance of Helen pondering Joan’s most vivid memory? What is the role of remembering in healing and moving through grief?
- Kevin insists upon being part of fighting the lawsuit filed against his family. Why is it so important for Kevin to tell his side of the story?
- Joan’s group offered its garden as a sign of hope, but as soon as it was planted, it was razed for bleachers. Still, God told Joan that her garden “grew.” What did God mean by that?

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Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

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Season 2, Episode 4

(First aired October 15, 2004)

“The Cat”

By Teresa Blythe

“They need a home,” says Feral Cat Lover (God) to Joan. That’s the only reason God gives Joan for taking in “Larry the Cat.” Helen (Joan’s mother) provides full-time care for her Aunt Olive after Olive has a stroke “because she’s family.” Christians live by what religion professor Scot McKnight calls “the Jesus Creed,” which is to love God wholeheartedly and love others as we love ourselves (Mark 12:29-31).*

Loving others as we love ourselves means doing our best to reach out to those who are suffering while also being mindful of our own needs. It means counting the cost of what we agree to do and making adjustments along the way.

Neither Larry nor Olive is immediately grateful for the gift of hospitality, which can be upsetting to those givers of hospitality. When Olive complains about the way she is being treated, Helen erupts in anger, faced with her own mixed feelings about the hospitality she offered. The next day, she lovingly takes Olive’s hand as a gesture of reconciliation.

Reaching out to others who are hurting is God’s call to all of us. Knowing how to do it—weathering the ups and downs of offering love and hospitality—is the complex part of living out “the Jesus Creed.”

Episode-in-a-nutshell

God asks Joan to adopt a feral cat. After Joan’s visiting Aunt Olive has a debilitating stroke, Helen takes Olive in and makes Joan get rid of the caged cat. Adam offers to foster “Larry the Cat” and makes progress toward domestication.

The well-traveled, independent and eccentric Olive proves to be a difficult patient, unwilling to accept help from anyone in the Girardi family. Kevin finally convinces her that asking for help is not a sign of weakness. As soon as Olive regains a bit of confidence and mobility, she leaves unannounced for another adventure.

Will bristles as he gets a new boss in the internal affairs investigation.

Luke longs for Grace to open up more to him, and when she does, she reveals that her mother has a drinking problem.

Questions for discussion

- Would you have provided temporary in-home care for Olive if she had been a member of your extended family? Why or why not? Did Helen count the cost of taking in Olive before agreeing to it?
- Read Mark 12:29-31, the passage Scot McKnight calls “the Jesus Creed.” In what ways were people in this episode living out this commandment or creed? The commandment is rather simple—love God; love others as yourself—yet living it out can be complex and difficult. How do you make decisions and choices based on this commandment?



Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

“The Cat”—page 2

- Helen says to Will, “I’m just so tired of hearing about Olive’s wonderful life.” What was it about Olive’s life that made Helen upset? Is there anyone in your life that inspires envy like that? How do you cope with the feeling of envy?
- What lessons does Joan learn about reaching out to difficult people by taking in Larry the Cat?
- Why do you suppose Adam had more success in fostering Larry than Joan did? Have you ever had the experience of wanting to help someone but finding that someone else was more gifted in helping them than you were? What does this say about living and working in community (as opposed to living and working as merely individuals)?
- Joan thought she was supposed to change Larry the Cat. But God asks, “Why do you think he was the one that was supposed to change?” What do you think God meant by that? How are we changed as we reach out to others?
- The episode seems to ask us to connect Larry with Olive, since both are testy and independent—and both run away in the end. With Larry, Joan had a pamphlet that instructed her in how to approach a feral cat. What are some guidelines you might come up with to assist people in being hospitable and gracious to difficult people?
- See McKnight’s new book, *The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others* (Paraclete Press, 2004, www.paracletepress.com).

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Season 2, Episode 5

(First aired October 22, 2004)

“The Election”

By Teresa Blythe

“You have a chance to make a difference here.”—Locksmith (God) to Joan

Just a few days before citizens of the United States select a President (and many other elected officials), Joan of Arcadia features an episode in which God prods Joan to take a political stand. Joan discounts the task, saying, “It’s not like some kid is going to invade a country.” But God wants Joan to get excited about working for change.

The writer of the New Testament book of James says, “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:17), which means that our faith is part of our daily lives, whether we think it is or not. If it isn’t, then it’s not real faith, just an intellectual game we play with ourselves. In this episode, God is telling Joan that her faith needs to make a difference in the world.

Joan ends up wanting desperately for her candidate to win, and her zeal results in a situation that calls her ethical standards into question. She has to decide what kind of difference she is being asked to make.

Episode-in-a-nutshell

God instructs Joan to get involved in the political process at Arcadia High School. When the campaign gets dirty for Joan’s “brainy” candidate, she declares it’s time to throw some dirt back at the popular jock candidate, Lars. She follows Lars around with a camera phone, and captures an image of him kissing another guy in a secluded location. After seeing the pain on Lars’ face when he thinks she is going to reveal his secret, Joan later decides not to tell anyone about what she saw.

Helen (Joan’s mother and the art teacher at Arcadia High) faces a dilemma when—for religious reasons—one student protests another student’s artwork. The protesting student ends up quitting art class and criticizing Helen for disregarding her opinion.

Will (Joan’s father) treats Kevin like a real reporter for a change, asking him to pass along any information Kevin might hear about Will’s new boss.

Adam gets an art scholarship, based on the political poster he created for Joan’s candidate, who loses to Lars.

Questions for discussion

- Do you believe God takes sides in human competitions, such as political elections? Why or why not? How does your faith in God influence how you vote or which causes you support?

- What is your response to people who say that religion and politics should not mix?



Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

“The Election” —page 2

- Read James 2:14-26. How is faith related to works? Why are the two inseparable? Describe a time in your life when you knew your faith was a deep influence on an action you took.
- Think about the scene where a student objects to artwork that featured a dead gerbil. The critic complained that it was disrespectful “to life” to use the dead gerbil, and didn’t understand why it was “art.” When faced with controversial art or statements about life, how do you make a distinction about what is or is not respectful or appropriate? How helpful was Helen’s response?
- Barbara Hall, the creator of Joan of Arcadia, has said in repeated interviews that she is committed to having God—on this show—emphasize the free will of human beings. How does she do that in this episode?
- Was it ethical for Joan and Judith to photograph Lars kissing someone? Why or why not? What would you have done, if you were the one witnessing the kiss?
- Joan tells her mom, “The important thing is to win.” Helen says, “But what’s winning?” How important is winning to you? How do you measure success in your life? What is God’s measure of success?
- On this show revelations from God don’t always come straight from God’s mouth. Who, in this episode—besides the two God figures—speaks God’s truth to Joan?
- Joan wonders why it’s so hard to remember that other people are just as scared in life as she is. Why is it difficult to live by the Golden Rule of treating others as we would like to be treated?

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Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

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Season 2, Episode 6

(First aired October 29, 2004)

“Wealth of Nations”

By Teresa Blythe

“You stole from the homeless?”—Adam to Joan

God asks Joan to put her economic theories about distribution of wealth to action—close to home. As we read the Bible, we find this is hardly an unusual request from God. The prophets in early Israel proclaimed a consistent message from God:

- “Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate.” —Amos 5:15
- “Is this not the fast that I [God] choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?” —Isaiah 58:6
- “Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressors anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place.” —Jeremiah 22:3

Joan intended to follow God’s lead in collecting clothes for the church closet. But her good intentions went awry when she concocted a way to exchange donated clothes for money, skimming off the top for herself and her friends.

God’s command for us to establish justice has never wavered. Our commitment to it—and our understanding of how best to live it out—does. In God’s words to Joan, “she stopped trusting” and that’s where she went wrong.

How do you live out God’s edict to “do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God?” (Micah 6:8)

Episode-in-a-nutshell

In her excitement for Adam Smith’s economic principles, Joan seeks to multiply donations for homeless people by selling “the good stuff” at thrift shops and buying even more coats for the needy. She and her friend Judith end up skimming off the top. They upset a donor, who finds the coat he gave away—not on a homeless person—but on Joan’s mom, Helen, who unknowingly purchased it at a thrift shop.

Will (Joan’s father) considers filing his own lawsuit over Kevin’s accident, in order to protect the family. His boss at the police department uncovers information that could help him fight the first lawsuit out-of-court.

Luke encourages his tough-talking girlfriend, Grace, to attend “Alateen,” so she won’t feel so alone living with her mom’s alcoholism. He goes to a meeting with her and is elated when she finally introduces him to someone as “her boyfriend.”

Kevin gets jealous of his ex-girlfriend’s new lawyer boyfriend who is doing stand-up comedy. So he provides dueling comedy, doing his own “sit-down” routine at open-mike night at the comedy club.

Questions for discussion

- Read the three passages on God’s justice listed in the opening statement of this study guide. In light of what God spoke through the early prophets of Israel, how well do we honor God’s appeal for justice today?

Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

“Wealth of Nations”—page 2

- Think for a moment about Joan’s original plan to increase the amount of clothing for the homeless. Was it ethical? Was it fair to everyone involved? Discuss your conclusions.
- The 15th-century founder of the Jesuit order, Ignatius of Loyola, once commented that good people don’t usually do bad things intentionally. But that good people are susceptible to allowing a good deed to swerve out of control and become sinful. Where did Joan’s good idea begin to go astray? Have you ever experienced a kind of “good deed gone astray” in your life? Where did it begin to veer away from God’s way into some other way?
- God shows Joan a dollar bill that says “In God We Trust,” and then tells her that she did not trust him. What would Joan have done differently if she had trusted God? What are some ways we trust in a God we cannot see?
- Lilly Watters, the ex-nun that Helen has befriended, quotes a saying from Jesus about “the poor will always be with you,” and then tells Helen that it doesn’t mean we have to become poor by letting others take things from us. Look up the context of what Jesus was saying in John 12:1-8. Does what Jesus was saying about Mary anointing him with expensive oil seem related to Helen’s dilemma over the lawsuit? If so, in what way? If not, why would Lilly quote that Scripture to make a point?
- Lilly accuses Helen of wanting to be a saint—and the implication is that it’s a self-serving motivation. What, in your opinion, is a saint? Who in your life is a saint to you? Is wanting to be a saint a bad thing? Is such a desire self-serving?
- Will’s boss apparently believes that “the end justifies the means.” Can you point out what she does in this episode that supports that ethical stance? Do you approve of her tactics? If you were Will, what would you do with the contents of the file on their legal opponent?

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Season 2, Episode 7

(First aired November 5, 2004)

“P.O.V.”

By Teresa Blythe

“Perception depends on how you see, not just what you see.”—Garbage Man (God)

As the title of this episode indicates, our “point of view” sometimes determines our worldview. Joan makes a videotape of her world from her own limited point of view. She sees an act of human kindness that she misinterprets as an act of betrayal by her two best friends—Judith and Adam. Acting on her assumptions, Joan confronts Judith in hurt and anger and ends up in a violent encounter.

When Joan gets another “point of view,” that is a video of the same event from Judith’s hidden camera, she realizes that her assumption—that Adam and Judith were sexually attracted to one another—was way off base. The hug was more about Joan and the quality of her friendships than it was about either Adam or Judith.

History is rife with accounts of conflict and heartache from faulty assumptions. In the Christian story of Jesus’ resurrection, consider the disciples’ depressing “first day of the week” after Jesus had been crucified (Luke 24:13-35). While walking to Emmaus and assuming Jesus was out of their lives forever, they encountered a man who asked them a number of questions. They enjoyed his company and asked him to stay with them that evening. When the man took bread, blessed it and broke it with them at dinner, the Scripture says, “their eyes were opened and they recognized him” as the risen Jesus. Assuming Jesus was gone from their world, the disciples had given in to hurt and despair.

The Garbage Man (God) tells Joan to “take it all in,” and “let yourself be dazzled.” He also cautions her not to let the hurt she feels cloud any light that needs to come into her life. What assumptions about the world cloud your perception? What might you need to see differently?

Episode-in-a-nutshell

God nudges Joan into making a video documentary of her life for public television. Joan’s attempts to have everyone “act natural,” but following her instructions irritates family and friends.

Adam needs help with his art project but Joan is too busy. Judith agrees to help Adam, and they become closer—mostly because of their mutual affection for Joan. Joan sees Judith and Adam hugging and misreads the situation.

Will’s boss Lucy recommends a tougher lawyer for the Girardis to use in countering the lawsuit filed against them in Kevin’s accident.

Helen considers having coffee with an old college boyfriend. The idea at first excites her, but then each time she starts to follow through, she cancels. In the end, she tells him she doesn’t want to see him again.

Questions for discussion

- The Pretentious Filmmaker (God) tells Joan, “You’ve got to look below the surface. Sometimes what you see is just a mask for something deeper.” Do you find it easy or difficult to look “below the surface” of a situation in which you are directly involved? What helps you see beyond the masks to the deeper level?



Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

“P.O.V.”—page 2

- Read the story of the disciples’ walk to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). Name a few of the assumptions the disciples have accepted. Which ones, in your opinion, ring true and which ones ring false? If you had been walking with them that day, would your assumptions have been any different? Why or why not?
- Joan thinks she can capture her life on videotape—if only everyone will just “act naturally.” Grace reminds her that once she turns the camera on and observes behavior, that behavior changes. In your experience, how has the act of observation changed a situation? How “real” is action captured on camera? Would using a hidden camera make a difference? If so, in what way? Do you put more credence in documentary films than in ones that use actors? Why or why not?
- Videotape looks real but there are several ways in which it is limited and acts as a filter. Can you name a few? (Think about what is seen and what is not, what is left in and what is left out.) Similarly, theologians and spiritual directors remind us that all our experience of God is limited and indirect since it is always filtered through our brains and bodies. Do you find the notion of an indirect experience of God comforting or disturbing? Why? How is Joan’s experience of God filtered, even though she is able to see God?
- The Girardis are uncomfortable with the new pushy, “win at any cost” attorney they meet. Helen says the lawsuit is not a game to win. How did that scene make you feel? Did you agree with Helen when she referred to Kevin’s accident as an “act of God?” How do you determine what is or is not an “act of God?” If you were the Girardi family, would you hire that pushy lawyer? Why or why not?
- Joan accuses Judith of trying to steal her boyfriend—and a fistfight erupts. Name some of the different assumptions at work in this situation that end up causing conflict for Joan and Judith. What are some ways Joan could have assessed and evaluated her assumptions? Do you easily jump to conclusions? What are some ways to avoid doing that?
- At the end of the episode, Adam shares with Joan some old videotapes of himself with his now deceased mother. Discuss the parallel between the old tapes and the video Joan wanted Adam to participate in. What were some reasons he resisted Joan’s video coaching? Can you think of a time when your memories made it difficult to go along with a friend’s suggestions? Did you explain your resistance? If so, how?

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Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

Season 2, Episode 8

(First aired November 12, 2004)

“Friday Night”

By Teresa Blythe

“I just want my friend back.”—Joan to Dog Walker (God)

Death draws us to the heart of God like no other life event. Although everyone knows on an intellectual level that death is a reality, when it hits close to home we feel a loss like no other. Even Christians, who believe in life after death, find the finality of losing a friend or loved one difficult to accept.

Joan’s anger at God when her best friend, Judith, dies, and God’s reactions (the Nigerian Doctor God looks pained while the Dog Walker God appears accepting) are helpful to us. We know Joan’s anger is real. People of faith also attest to the reality of a God that grieves with us while accepting our anger and disappointment.

God, in this television series, is not a “fixer” who miraculously intervenes to make all things go our way. We read about this God in the life of the biblical King David—a God who shares our pain. This episode reminds us of the many Psalms of lament, in which people pour out their anger, pain and distress before God. These Psalms (see Psalm 102 as an example) show us the way to be honest and open with God.

It takes mature faith to be able to state, as the Brief Statement of Faith for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) begins: “In life and in death we belong to God.” It takes an even deeper faith to accept it in our darkest hours.

Episode-in-a-nutshell

Joan tries to learn how to juggle for a physics class. She’s distracted by plans for her first real date with Adam—at a fancy French restaurant on Friday night. The date goes well, but when it’s done, Joan gets the upsetting news that her friend Judith is seriously injured.

While Joan was at dinner with Adam, Judith spent the evening with some old friends involved in buying drugs, and ended up with multiple stab wounds. Joan and her family rush to the hospital to be with Judith, who dies of internal bleeding while Joan is by her side.

Before Judith dies, she repeats something that God said to Joan earlier that week about juggling. Judith’s final words are, “just focus on the catching.”

Joan confronts Nigerian Doctor (God) about Judith. God tells Joan that Judith made choices that set a particular outcome in motion. Judith considers Nigerian Doctor (God) to be her angel because “he’s the only one who will look at me.”

Questions for discussion

- Read Psalm 102. Imagine the person who is writing or living this prayer. What sustains his or her faith in the midst of the pain? Imagine you are Joan writing a psalm of lament about Judith’s death. What do you think she might say?

“Friday Night”—page 2

- God does not intervene to save Judith from dying. This upsets Joan. But God explains that certain choices have dire consequences. What does God’s non-intervention say about God’s power? If God is all-powerful, why is God refusing to intervene? How is your belief in God’s power similar or different from the belief portrayed in this episode?
- The metaphor of juggling comes up repeatedly in this episode. God tells Joan to “catch what’s coming at you,” and Judith advises Joan to “not try to control it. Just focus on the catching.” Is the metaphor of juggling helpful to you? Why or why not?
- Consider the story that the Dog Walker (God) tells about the man crossing the bridge with boxes that are too heavy. Does that story describe your experience of life? If so, how? What different emotions do you juggle on a regular basis?
- Listen to the final song playing while Joan is juggling. The song is by singer-songwriter Warren Zevon, who died of cancer shortly after recording it. How does the subject of the song relate to what Joan is feeling about Judith’s death?
- After Judith dies, Joan’s mother, Helen, tells her husband, Will, “All we’ve been through is Kevin. He’s still here.” This death changes the Girardi’s perspective on life. Have you experienced a change in perspective after losing to death someone you loved? How was life different in the light of a painful death?
- Several Reformed confessions of faith include some version of the statement, “In life, in death, in life beyond death, we belong to God.” How does belonging to God change our perspective on death? If God is the author of life, how are we to understand God in death?
- What aspects of the life, death and life-beyond-death of Jesus give you comfort in the face of a painful loss?

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Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

Season 2, Episode 9

(First aired November 19, 2004)

“No Future”

By Teresa Blythe

It is a tenet of Christian theology that although many things that happen are clearly not the will of God, nothing happens outside of God’s providential love and care. That God can and will work through all manner of trouble to bring light out of darkness.

In this episode, entitled “No Future,” Joan is told twice by God that she has “free will” to make choices that can shape her future. Rather than *no future*, Joan has no *fixed* future. She can trust God to keep her in God’s care, even if—and when—bad things happen.

The Girardi family is experiencing great pain as each person thinks about the day of Kevin’s accident. Their memories bring up feelings of sadness, guilt and remorse. But the time and attention given to the memories of events around the accident work to bring the family closer—reminding them of what they have rather than what they have lost. God is at work, not just in Joan’s life, but also in the life of her family, bringing healing in the aftermath of the accident.

It is in that way we can say, with the Apostle Paul, “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8: 38-39).

Episode-in-a-Nutshell

Joan sees her therapist about Judith’s death and her recurring visions of God. Her grief over Judith affects her grades—she fails the first physics test of the school year. Principal Price tells Joan that because of her low grades, she is no longer a candidate for a four-year college and needs to think about community college.

The Girardi family faces a lot of old and painful memories as the lawsuit surrounding Kevin’s accident goes into the deposition phase.

Luke asks a reluctant Grace to come to his house for a birthday dinner, saying that showing up would be a good birthday present. Joan gives Luke a special kite for his birthday—something he wanted years ago but didn’t get because of the family’s pre-occupation with Kevin’s accident.

Questions for Discussion

- Read Romans 8: 31-39. What does this portion of Paul’s letter to the church in Rome say about the future?
- When it’s time for Joan to think about her future in college, Gay Male Secretary (God) reminds her that her future is not set in stone—she has free will. Do you think of the future as something that is pre-determined by God for you? What role does free will on your part play in determining your future? What role does God play?

“No Future”—page 2

- Joan visits Fortune Teller (God) who restates that the future is not fixed, and that she should bring her consciousness to the moment. “Don’t forget about the present, Joan,” says God. What spiritual practices do you use to bring your consciousness to the present moment?

- Consider the flashback in which Will yells at Kevin the day of homecoming (before the accident). Will indicates that one day Kevin will get some “comeuppance” and that Will will get some satisfaction at that time. Unfortunately that’s one of the last things Will said to Kevin before the accident that left Kevin paralyzed. What suggestions do you have for Will that would help him work through the guilt he is feeling about what he said to Kevin that day? How do you and your family reconcile when relationships go awry?

- Will confides his guilt to his boss Lucy but not to his wife Helen (because she is already hurting so badly). Do you think it’s a good idea to keep secrets in order to spare another person’s feelings? What if that person is your closest friend or spouse? What are some possible outcomes if Will continues to confide in Lucy but not in Helen?

- Will’s boss, Lucy, says to Helen, “I hear you’re religious. That must come in handy.” Is faith a “handy” or utilitarian way to cope with life difficulties? Does your faith make your life easier or more difficult? How does it make your life easier? How does it make your life harder? Can you imagine your life without faith in God?

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Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

Season 2, Episode 10

(First aired November 26, 2004)

“The Book of Questions”

By Teresa Blythe

“This scroll—there are no easy answers in here. It’s basically a book of questions. Something that makes us keep searching for a way to make sense of this mess.”—Grace in her bat mitzvah speech

The Torah—a scroll or scrolls containing the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy)—is the Jewish book of law. Grace’s speech at her bat mitzvah reveals her mature outlook on the law. Although the Torah is a book of instruction, it is not a book of easy answers. It is sacred literature that invites us to ask the deepest questions in life. It also points us to the mystery we call God, who repeatedly respects and honors our questions.

We need look no further than the Torah and Moses to find instruction on how to question God. Moses asked God, “Why have you mistreated this people (the Israelites who were slaves in Egypt)? Why did you ever send me?” (Genesis 5:22). And after the people had been liberated and were wandering in the wilderness, complaining that life in Egypt’s slavery was better, Moses asked God, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me” (17:4).

Is life-in-God only about the questions we ask? Many modern theologians would answer, “yes.” Will we be satisfied with questions and no answers? Like Joan, most of us find it is only human to say to God earnestly, “People need answers.”

Episode-in-a-nutshell

God tells Joan to help Grace with her bat mitzvah. At first Grace is not interested in help. Then she needs a dress (something Grace rarely wears) for the event, and asks Joan to shop with her. While shopping, Joan meets Grace’s mother, who she later learns is an alcoholic.

When Grace thinks about canceling her bat mitzvah, Joan challenges her to stand up for herself at the event—speaking her mind and “getting in people’s faces for real.”

Luke struggles to find the perfect gift for Grace’s big day. He finds out that the night of the event is also the night of a meteor shower, so he escorts Grace outside to give her the gift of enjoying the shower.

Will investigates Judith’s murder and supports some less-than-kosher tactics to get a witness to describe the killer.

Kevin’s ex-girlfriend, Beth, answers a lawyer’s questions about the night of the accident that left Kevin paralyzed.

Questions for discussion

- Watch the scene of the bat mitzvah service toward the end of the episode. What image, word or phrase from that series of scenes conveys the greatest sense of the sacred for you?

“The Book of Questions”—page 2

- Joan presses God for answers, saying, “People need answers.” God—at Grace’s bat mitzvah—tells Joan “it’s not about answers, it’s about asking the right questions.” What is more important to you—life’s questions or life’s answers? Do you seek answers? If so, have you found them? What do you think God (and Grace, in her speech) mean when they speak about the importance of asking the right questions? How is God found and experienced in our questions?
- Read Moses’ questions to God in Genesis 5:22 and 17:4. Then read the subsequent passages. Did God provide answers? If God answered Moses, why won’t God provide answers to Joan?
- Adam asks Joan if God ever said anything to her about death that would make things clearer, and Joan says, “It doesn’t work that way.” Why do you think death is such a mystery to us? How does your faith help you understand death?
- “Me in a dress? It takes a village.” Those were Grace’s words about buying a dress for her bat mitzvah. In your life, what kinds of activities take “a village” or community around you for help? In what ways do Judaism and Christianity counter our culture’s emphasis on individualism?
- When Joan meets Hall Monitor (God) in the bookstore, God picks up a Styrofoam cup and lectures Joan about its half-life. “Sometimes I think all I do is ask humanity to clean up its room,” says God. When you think of environmental problems caused by human habits of consumption, do you ever think about God’s response? How does your faith tradition speak out in favor of environmental clean-up efforts? How does God desire us to “clean up our room?”
- Joan asks God, “Why did you make so many religions?” God says that people need different ways to share the same truth. How is it that you understand the existence of different religions?
- Will’s boss, Lucy, uses questionable ethics to do effective police work. When they work, Will is pleased, although Helen finds his approval of the unethical practices appalling. Is it ever OK for government officials to lie in order to solve crimes or get to the truth? Why or why not? Has Will changed, as Helen charges? In what way? What are some of the possible outcomes of Will’s assent to unethical police tactics?

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Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

Season 2, Episode 11

(First aired December 10, 2004)

“Dive”

By Teresa Blythe

Sometimes we feel paralyzed by our fears, but God looks past our fears to see our potential. Moses felt he wasn't a good enough speaker to take the people's case to Pharaoh. God replied that God had made Moses "like God to Pharaoh, and Aaron (Moses' brother) to be Moses' prophet" (Exodus 6:28–7:7). God took Moses' fear seriously and provided a way for him to follow the divine plan regardless.

In “Dive” God wants Joan to stretch herself by doing something that scares her. Diving becomes Joan's metaphor for coping with Judith's death. Helen faces her fear of a God that doesn't intervene to stop bad things from happening to her children. Luke faces his fear of failure by failing and seeing that the fear was worse than the embarrassment of failing.

What are you afraid of in life? How is God asking you to move past that fear?

Episode-in-a-nutshell

God asks Joan to do something that scares her. She chooses diving, since she's afraid of heights. Her brother, Luke, joins her in the effort after his girlfriend taunts him for “hiding in his head” and not taking risks.

Helen falls into an overprotective mode after reflecting on Judith's death and Kevin's accident. She talks with her spiritual advisor, Lilly, about why life has so many “tests.”

Will continues to search for the guy who stabbed Judith to death when a drug deal went bad.

Kevin goes on a date with his ex-girlfriend Beth—the one he broke up with the night of his accident.

Questions for discussion

- Read the story of Moses and Aaron obeying God's command to confront the Egyptian Pharaoh (Exodus 6:26–7:7). How does God provide for Moses? Have you ever felt God asking you to do something you were unprepared or unequipped to do? If so, did you follow through? How did God provide for you?
- Helen wonders if everything in life has to feel like a test. Do you agree with her spiritual advisor that life is a series of tests and we don't always like the teacher when we learn a hard lesson? Reflect on the last “testing” time in your life. What did you learn? Did it involve taking a risk?
- Luke reflects on his reluctance to take risks in life. Would you describe yourself as a risk-taker? How do you decide what is worth taking a risk for?



Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

“Dive”—page 2

- If you were to choose something to do that scares you, what would it be? Why?
- Helen admits to Will that she’s scared of God—what God will do next. Are you afraid of God? What images of God produce fear in you? Read 1 John 4:7–21. How might you describe to someone like Helen what that passage means?
- In a dream Judith tells Joan to just “surrender” to her fear and not run from it. What is your usual response to fear? Do you surrender to it, or run from it? What would God have you do?
- Luke’s abysmal dive made him feel much better. Why?
- God tells Joan that God’s request (to do something that scared her) wasn’t about diving. What was it really about? How did Joan face it? How do you face your fear of death? Have you ever been too afraid to face up to someone’s death? What helped you get through the pain?

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Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

Season 2, Episode 12

(First aired January 7, 2005)

“Game Theory”

By Teresa Blythe

While faith draws many of us together, it can sometimes be a divisive force. Jesus warned his disciples of this when he made the shocking statement that households will be divided because of him (Luke 12:49–53). In this episode, and in the ongoing story of Helen’s confirmation in the Catholic faith, Helen and Will are at different points on their spiritual journeys. She is open to the mystery of God’s revelation in the world. Will is hostile and derisive of a God that, as he puts it, “can destroy us ... and nobody gets to know why.”

Like Helen, most of us don’t turn our backs on people in our lives when they don’t share our faith. We would rightly see that as unloving. So are we to interpret what Jesus said about bringing division—and not peace—on earth?

Jesus tells a hard truth when he says that following him will make some people uncomfortable. He predicts the kind of division that Helen experiences. It’s not that we are to shut people out of our lives when they don’t believe as we do, but we are to extend even more of the freeing love of Christ to them.

Episode-in-a-nutshell

Joan thinks her grades are too low for her to be “college material.” But God convinces her to accompany her boyfriend, Adam, on a field trip to a state college, just to check it out. While there she meets Roger, a charming student who persuades Joan to hire him as a tutor.

Lucy, Will’s boss at the police department, continues to be a stress point for Will and Helen. In addition, Will taunts Helen about her studies for Catholic confirmation. She asks him to stop being hostile toward her faith.

Will arrests the man he believes is responsible for Judith’s murder. But a plea bargain arranged by Lucy complicates the case.

Questions for discussion

- When Joan attends what she calls “the class for underachievers,” Goth kid (God) sits next to her for part of the presentation. Have you ever felt the presence of God simply with you, accompanying you in your day? How did God’s presence change your day?
- Will and Helen have a significant fight over “ultimate concerns” in their lives—her faith and his tendency to be a workaholic. Will sums up Christian faith as “God created us. God can destroy us. Nobody asked to be here. Nobody gets to know why.” The recent horrific tsunami in the Indian Ocean left many people asking similar questions. How would you respond to Will? Was Helen’s response appropriate, in your opinion?



Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

“Game Theory”—page 2

- Read Luke 12:49–53, and look it up in some Bible commentaries to see the variety of interpretations. What do you think Jesus means when he says, “I came to bring fire to the earth?” We usually think of Jesus as the “Prince of Peace.” What do you think he means when he says he came to bring division? How did the scholars writing in the commentaries answer those same questions?
- If you were Helen, would you find the Luke 12: 49–53 passage helpful? Why or why not?
- Joan tells the potential tutor, Roger, that college is just not her game. God tells her a decision against college calls for discernment. What do you think is the difference between decision-making and spiritual discernment? What are some ways Joan discerns this matter?
- Chess player (God) instructs Joan to believe in herself, because he does. God says every move she makes affects and informs the next move in life—so that, by plan, there has to be a way to “win.” Re-watch that scene if possible. Reflect on what God is saying to Joan. Do you see every move you make as an important part of God’s plan? If so, how do you understand your mistakes?
- In this episode the game is used as a metaphor for life. Is life like a game to you? If so, how? If not, is there a better metaphor for you to use?
- Using an Internet or library search, look up “game theory” and “chaos theory”—two scientific theories mentioned in this episode. As you read about each, ask yourself: How does this inform my faith? Share your findings with a friend or a small group discussing this episode.

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Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

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Season 2, Episode 13

(First aired January 14, 2005)

“Queen of the Zombies”

By Teresa Blythe

“What just happened?” Joan asks, as her enthusiastic producer-director of the school play allows one of Grace’s ideas to transform the whole “Zombies-in-Love” production at the last minute. We naturally want order and stability in all things, but in God’s universe, sometimes the creative process involves change, revision and even chaos.

The Bible is filled with characters like Joan who want life to make sense. God, however, consistently tells humans that we don’t have all the information. Job, for example, has one of the most dramatic encounters with God after losing everything of value in his life except his relationship with God. But God doesn’t give Job any of the concrete answers he wants. Instead God asks Job a series of questions, including, “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” (Job 38:4). The entire encounter humbles Job into understanding that only God has the full picture of life.

Episode-in-a-nutshell

God asks Joan to try out for the chorus of the school drama. The guest director, “Johnny Broadway,” wants to stay open to the creative process, so he allows the drama to be rewritten at several places just before the show. In one of the changes, Joan is placed in the lead and discovers she’s a pretty good singer.

Adam develops stage sets for the zombie play, which look good but fall apart during the production.

The young man at the center of the lawsuit against the Girardis (Andy) decides to tell the truth and end the lawsuit over damages in the accident that left Kevin paralyzed. Andy suffers the consequences with his family, and has to move out to the YMCA to flee their wrath. Kevin becomes drawn to Andy’s loneliness and pain, and tries to find ways to help.

Questions for discussion

- Read the book of Job in the Bible. What does God have to say about what we experience as chaos in the world?
- Will (Joan’s father) has been struggling all season to understand situations in which life seems to make no sense and “where things happen for no reason.” Toward the end of this episode, Will seems to experience a change of heart. What are some of the actions that lead up to Will’s change of heart? How might those actions be connected?
- What are some of the reasons why Kevin might be drawn to Andy despite Andy’s role in the accident that left Kevin paralyzed? Have you ever befriended someone who hurt you deeply? How did the trust build? Did you feel the presence of God healing that relationship? If so, what were some signs that God was involved?



Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

“Queen of the Zombies”—page 2

- Johnny Broadway tells the student actors, “Inspiration doesn’t follow a schedule. When it shows up, you gotta follow it!” When was the last time you felt inspired? Did you follow it? What was the result?
- Johnny Broadway reveals himself to be God late in the episode. This is the first time in the series that God has spent considerable time as a character in Joan’s ordinary life. What does the continuing presence of God—in the character of Johnny Broadway—mean for Joan? Have you ever looked back on an experience with a person and felt the special presence of God in that person? How does God meet us in people we interact with on a daily basis?
- Female Custodian (God) tells Joan she will “know her moment when it comes.” Have you ever had a special moment where you had the opportunity to shine? Did you take it? If so, what did you discover about yourself? About God? If you didn’t take it, what did you discover about yourself? About God?
- Consider the process by which Joan became “Queen of the Zombies.” What part did Grace play? What was Johnny Broadway’s response to Grace’s interpretation of a “zombie revolution?” What made Joan the right person for the “Queen of the Zombies” role?
- Review the last conversation Joan has with Johnny Broadway (God). Compare that conversation with what God says to Job in chapters 38–39.

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Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

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Season 2, Episode 14

(First aired January 28, 2005)

“The Rise and Fall of Joan Girardi”

By Teresa Blythe

The Bible is full of stories of great victory followed by big let-downs. The people of Israel escape from slavery in Egypt only to find they are hungry and miserable in the wilderness. There is no way David can retain King Saul’s devotion after slaying Goliath and becoming more popular than the king. The glorious baptism of Jesus—in which a voice proclaims Jesus to be God’s beloved—is followed by 40 days of temptation in the desert.

This doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy our victories. We just have to recognize also that in life almost every spiritual “push” is followed by a “counter-push” that we also have to endure. Thankfully, not all are as dramatic as the Bible stories mentioned above. In the history of Christian spirituality Ignatius of Loyola taught this “push and counter-push” dynamic to his Jesuit brothers. His advice is that we be aware of the counter-push, but never allow the let-down to overshadow the grace and love of God that came to us in the first place.

For Joan this means realizing she is both a hero and the same person she was before she prevented the pedestrian accident. And then gracefully negotiating the challenges that come with finding oneself in the limelight.

Episode-in-a-nutshell

Joan saves the life of one of the high school’s “mean girls,” Dylan (played by guest star Hilary Duff), and becomes a hero.

Luke goes for a drivers’ license even though his girlfriend, Grace, objects because she finds motor vehicles to be a blight on the environment.

Adam creates an ad campaign for his boss, only to find his boss presents the ideas as his own and treats Adam like a servant in the presence of the client.

Will searches for evidence that a co-worker in the police department might have been involved in the murder of Judith’s killer.

Questions for discussion

- Have you ever done something positive that put you in the limelight? If so, how did that feel? Did the fame turn on you in any way?

- Conversions or turnarounds in life happen in many situations. For example, Dylan’s change of heart toward Joan is fairly dramatic. Has Dylan truly changed toward Joan? How can you tell? What is the evidence of a true conversion?



Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

“The Rise and Fall of Joan Girardi”—page 2

- Read the story of David becoming famous for slaying Goliath (1 Samuel 17). What is the aftermath (1 Samuel 18: 10–16)? How is this similar to, or different from, the aftermath Joan experiences in saving Dylan?
- What are some other stories you recall—from films, television, comic books or literature—in which a character experiences a great victory followed by a let-down or a new, risky challenge?
- Can you think of any times in your life where a spiritual “high” was closely followed by a low? How do you endure the “counter-push?” What are some ways to keep from letting the low take over your attitude in life?
- (Little Girl) God interrupts Joan’s privacy in a bathroom stall to talk about Dylan’s inability to see her own life. God says, “Some people think they can only see if they use someone else’s sight.” Have you ever had a friend that needed you to “see” some of God’s light for them? How did you help them with that? How did Joan help Dylan find her own sight?
- Joan lashes out against Dylan when Dylan returns to her “mean girl” friends and stops treating Joan like a friend. What is your reaction to how Joan confronted Dylan? What is the difference between “speaking the truth in love” to someone and retaliating in revenge? Which do you think Joan was doing?
- At the end of the episode (Personable Woman) God talks about “finding peace within the contradictions” of a paradox—two opposites that exist simultaneously. God says we will find God within those contradictions. Have you ever experienced God in that way? What do you think of the explanation God gives to Joan? Name some paradoxes in which you believe God is active in the world.

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Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

Season 2, Episode 15

(First aired February 11, 2005)

“Romancing the Joan”

By Teresa Blythe

One of the biblical images for God is the desirable Lover who pursues us. The intense connection we feel with a person we are in love with is one way we come to know and understand God’s love. But, as we see in many love stories, being in love is complicated and sometimes leads to heartache. Jacob, for example, falls in love with Rachel but has to sign over 14 years of his life in hard labor—and marry her older sister Leah first—in order to be joined in marriage to Rachel (Genesis 29).

Joan’s dreams of marrying Adam falter when she has a romantic moment with her college tutor, Roger. She begins to question what love really is. Little Girl (God) speaks to Joan of romantic love in this way: “Love is big. It’s a bright light in the universe. And a bright light casts a big shadow Real love is hard work. You have to decide if you want it in your story. Or if you’d rather just stay in your dream

In the end, Joan and Adam realize they are willing to work at loving one another—in reality, not just in their dreams.

Episode-in-a-nutshell

God tells Joan to take on an extra-credit assignment to analyze a poem by one of the Romantic poets. This causes Joan to think seriously about her relationship with Adam. Meanwhile, Joan continues to be attracted to her college tutor, Roger.

Adam acquires an art assistant, Stevie, a pretty and perky young woman who dotes on him. This provokes jealousy in Joan.

Kevin dates his mom’s confirmation coach—the former nun, Lilly—but the first date ends badly when he talks about his last girlfriend.

Will struggles with the knowledge that his boss, Lucy, had a murderer killed in order to impress Will. Helen struggles with her intuition, which tells her that Will is entangled with Lucy. Helen confronts Will and he admits to the entanglement, but assures her there was never any romantic affair.

Questions for discussion

- Read the love story of Jacob and Rachel in Genesis 29. What kind of hard work does Jacob have to endure to be able to marry Rachel? How is Jacob’s love for Rachel symbolic of God’s love for each of us?
- Substitute teacher (God) tells Joan to analyze a poem by one of the Romantic poets because “you might learn something; you might enjoy it; and I’m asking you to.” Joan’s reply indicates that she doesn’t think God is serious about the first two (learning and enjoying). Do you believe God is more interested in our obedience than in what we learn or enjoy? What does Joan’s reply reveal about her relationship with God? In your relationship with God, does God seem more interested in strict obedience than in learning or enjoyment in life?



Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

“Romancing the Joan”—page 2

- Geek (God) challenges Joan’s jealousy toward Adam’s assistant, Stevie, telling her that people don’t really belong to each other, even if they sign a contract. Have you ever thought of another person as a possession? Has anyone ever treated you like a possession? What does it mean to be “faithful” to the person we are in love with? What do you do when you feel jealousy getting in the way of a relationship?
- Lilly tells Helen to start thinking about evil, because “it’s out there.” What in life do you define as evil? How do you resist it? What was Christ’s response to evil?
- Roger asks Joan, “Do you feel loved ... enough?” How would you answer that question? If the answer is no, where do you turn to feel loved? How is God’s love related to the kind of love that people in love feel for one another?
- Lilly tells Kevin that “every [one] is broken in some way.” In what way are you broken? Is it obvious to you and to others? Paul tells us that we are strong in our brokenness. Read 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 and reflect on what Paul believes God said to him—about God’s grace being sufficient and power being made perfect in weakness. What do you think that means? How might your brokenness be used by God for the benefit of others?
- Little Girl (God) tells Joan that the romantic fairy tale, in which the guy risks his life and the girl is almost dead (until the kiss), is a metaphor for death and resurrection. Can you think of other metaphors for death and resurrection in literature or popular culture? In what way does Joan (and Adam) experience a sort of death and resurrection at the end of the episode? Think of some times in your life where there was a sort of death, or great loss, followed by new life.
- On the subject of love, Little Girl (God) tells Joan that the illusion has to die for something deeper to take place. What illusions do you hold onto? How might you let go of them for something deeper to take place?

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Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

Season 2, Episode 16

First aired Feb. 18, 2005

“Independence Day”

By Teresa Blythe

Free will—a topic Joan takes up with God on a regular basis—is a complicated matter. Some theologians argue that humans are rarely ever truly free. We are racked with addictions, compulsions and sinful habits that keep us from seeking God’s purpose for our lives. These theologians contend that only God’s grace—seen in the love of Christ—can make us free. Others point to human responsibility and say we are free—all we need to do is seek God’s guidance and make the right choices. Both viewpoints are found in Scripture, so we are left with a paradox.

There is no question, in this episode, that Joan has freedom to declare her independence and lie to her mother about her whereabouts. Throughout this series, just as we see throughout stories in the Bible, people have freedom to walk away from God’s purposes. Adam and Eve are free to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (even though they are not supposed to). Cain is free to kill his brother Abel. The prophet Jonah is free to refuse God’s command that he share good news with the Ninevites. It is clear from Scripture that God does not force us to do God’s will.

At the same time, God pleads with us to make choices that lead to life (See Deuteronomy 30:15-20). Joan thinks there’s life in declaring herself a free agent, old enough to stay overnight with her boyfriend at a concert. What she finds out is that her choice had no long-term freedom or life in it. Only when she faced her mother with the truth did Joan find real freedom.

Episode-in-a-Nutshell

Joan defies her mother’s orders by attending a rock concert with Adam—staying overnight with him in a camper. The situation leads to tension between Joan and Adam when he wants to have sex and she doesn’t.

Will investigates a family dispute that ends in murder.

Luke lectures Friedman for his lack of interest in an attractive female—Stevie—who has a crush on Friedman.

Kevin and Andy become closer friends as Andy reveals he can no longer bear to drive after the accident he caused that led to Kevin’s paralysis.

Questions for Discussion

- Read Deuteronomy 30:15-20. In this passage, the covenant between God and the people of Israel is outlined in terms of the people’s free will. What does it mean to “choose life?” How do our choices lead to either life or death—either literally or metaphorically?
- In Joan’s first conversation with Goth Kid (God) in this episode, Joan takes God’s observations as approval of her decision to stay overnight in the camper with Adam. What God said to Joan was “You can’t let your life be defined by other people.” Was God telling Joan to defy her mother’s orders? What does it mean to not let your life be defined by other people?



Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

“Independence Day”—page 2

- Helen tells Joan she can't go to the concert alone with Adam because she is too young. When does a person become an adult? When does a parent no longer have veto control on a child's actions?
- Three-card Monty (God) tells Joan to keep her eyes open—and on what is important—as she makes her decisions in “free will.” In what way is Joan free while at the concert with Adam? In what way is Joan not free? What is Joan failing to see? What is the important issue for her in this episode?
- Joan tells T-Shirt Vendor (God) that she is sorry for lying to her mom. Does Joan exhibit signs of true remorse in that conversation? What about later?
- Old Woman (God) says Joan's existence depends on the relationships she has with others. Think about all the different connections you have in the world. In what ways are you independent? In what ways are you dependent on others? How do you balance independence with connection in your relationships?
- Joan frequently shares her lessons from God with others. How does she do that in this episode? How do you share your God-inspired lessons with others?

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Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

Season 2, Episode 17

(First aired February 25, 2005)

“Shadows and Light”

By Teresa Blythe

Divinity has historically been symbolized by light. Moses saw God’s light in the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-12). The people of Israel followed the light from a pillar of fire out of Egypt (Exodus 13:17-22). Jesus is called “the light of the world” (John 1:1-5). Saul encounters the risen Christ as a bright light on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-9).

We frequently speak of “seeing the light” when we come to a new understanding. Bono, lead singer of U2, once told an audience that “whenever you see darkness, there is extraordinary opportunity for the light to burn brighter.” Light then is something we seek out as a positive force in our lives.

But as Joan discovers in this episode, the paradox of spiritual enlightenment is that many times this positive light triggers a painful time of adjustment. As the old saying goes, the truth will set us free, but it may hurt like hell in the meantime.

Episode-in-a-nutshell

God instructs Joan to help her new friend Stevie “get what she deserves.” In this case, it means to find Stevie’s true identity. Through Joan’s snooping, police find out Stevie had been kidnapped as a young child by her social worker when her birth mother suffered a heroin addiction. This discovery means the woman Stevie calls “Mom” is incarcerated and Stevie put in a foster home.

Adam feels humiliation because Joan told her mom about his sexual advances toward her the night they snuck away to a concert.

Kevin gets a TV reporting job. His first assignment is to try electrical stimulation to see if it could give his paralyzed muscles enough energy to help him take a step or two.

Questions for discussion

- Read through the four Biblical passages involving light listed in the first paragraph above. Which experience of light feels more familiar to you? Can you think of a time when God’s presence in your life involved some kind of light (literal or metaphorical)? What were your reactions to the references to light in this episode?
- When the Custodian (God) asks Joan to help Stevie get what she deserves, Joan immediately asks, “What about me?” How is it that God cares for your needs? Do you sometimes think God cares more about other people than about you? How do you make sure that your image of God is big enough?
- Cub Scout (God) warns Joan that it’s easy for people to stop searching for the truth when that truth is hard. What is a “hard truth” in your life? What helps you stay with the truth and not run from it? How do you share your “hard truth” with others? How do you share it with God?

- Adam feels embarrassed that Joan’s mother knows about his sexual advances toward Joan. If you had been in Joan’s situation, would you have told anyone about Adam’s advances? Would you have told a parent or guardian? What options did Adam have for restoring a good relationship with Helen after Joan shared that information?
- Electrician (God) says to Joan (while changing a light bulb) that “it’s everyone’s job to ‘let there be light.’” What is your role as a bearer of light in the world? Compare what God says to Joan in this scene with Jesus’ proclamation in the Sermon on the Mount that “You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14-16). How is what Electrician (God) says to Joan similar? How is it different?
- Electrician (God) tells Joan “I don’t punish people.” How do you react to this statement? Have you ever felt God as a disciplinary force in your life? What do you say to friends who think God is punishing them when something distressing happens in their life?
- The woman Stevie thinks is her mom (Erica) broke the law by kidnapping Stevie as a small child. Yet Joan contends that Erica “sacrificed her life for the love of Stevie.” Does the sacrifice and the love make what Erica did right? Have you ever done something wrong for the right reasons? How did it turn out? What would have been the ethical and moral choice for Erica to make upon seeing this small child being hurt by her drug-addicted mother?
- God told Joan that everything would proceed as it is supposed to with Stevie and Erica now that the truth is out. How do you think God stays in touch with people as they cope with the pain the truth causes? What are some ways God reaches out to us in our pain?

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Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

Season 2, Episode 18

(First aired March 4, 2005)

“Secret Service”

By Teresa Blythe

A recurring theme in the Joan of Arcadia series is that the actions of one human being on any given day can alter the course of another person’s life. We know this well when something traumatic or flashy happens—such as when the auto accident paralyzes Kevin or when Joan pushes a classmate to safety, keeping her from being hit by a car. But Joan needs to be reminded by God that even simple actions have “ripples” that change the course of history.

Biblical scholars such as John Dominic Crossan (*In Search of Paul*) remind us of one such ripple that had enormous effect on the spread of Christianity. “God-fearers” were non-Jews living all over the Ancient Near East who wanted to worship the God of the Jews and be like Jews. Paul was able to communicate his faith in Jesus to some of these God-fearers—like Titius Justus in Corinth—and saw a rapid growth in the influence of Christianity in the non-Jewish world.

It is humbling to think that every action we take makes ripples in history. As God tells Joan at the end of this episode, it is important to keep the faith and continue our conversation with God about all of life. In that way we can create good ripples even if we have no way of knowing the outcome.

Episode-in-a-nutshell

- God tells Joan to “rise above injustice” and do her community service time for a crime (egging the principal’s car) she did not commit. While doing so, Joan contemplates who she is meant to help—Lilly, the former nun who is overseeing the service, or one of the other misfits doing “community time” with Joan.

Joan notices the relationship between her and Adam is strained because of her reluctance to have sex with him.

Helen finds out art is not considered a priority at budget time in her school district.

Luke struggles with not being chosen for an award based on his work on string theory.

Kevin and Lilly bump into one another and banter their way to another date.

Questions for discussion

- Read the story of Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:1–17) to see the role Titius Justus—probably a “God-fearer” and definitely a Gentile—played in Paul’s evangelism to the Corinthians. What information can we glean from the text about Titius Justus? What role did he play in the spread of Christianity? What small acts in your life have gone on to produce “good ripples?”
- In this episode, Goth kid (God) tells Joan once again that God doesn’t interfere with people and nature, saying, “It’s part of the rules.” After watching a few episodes of Joan of Arcadia and getting a feel for what God has to say about “the rules,” can you articulate what a few of those basic rules are? Do those rules fit your image of God and how the world works?



Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

“Secret Service”—page 2

- Review the scene in which Joan and Grace talk about sex. What is Joan’s dilemma? What is really going on between her and Adam? What ethical or moral criteria do you use to make decisions about how to express your sexuality?
- When Joan complains about being unjustly accused of egging Price’s car, Tough guy (God) replies, “You suffered an injustice. It happens every day, all over the world. You can let it crush you, or you can rise above it.” If you were in Joan’s situation and got that response from God, what would you say in reply? What are some ways people in the real world rise above injustices they suffer?
- Homeless guy (God) tells Joan to “just pay attention—it will all add up.” How often during your daily life do you stop and simply pay attention to what is going on? How does Joan follow through on God’s demand? Does it add up? How?
- Lilly—acting like an embittered ex-nun—says God is a control freak who demands perfection. Think about stories you recall from the Bible. What evidence from those stories would either support or refute that statement? Think about your knowledge and experience of God. Do you believe God is a control freak who demands perfection?
- What does the source of Lilly’s anger at God turn out to be? How is it resolved? How do you express your anger at God?
- Trash man (God) points out to Joan that as long as she is talking to God, she must have faith that her actions have a point. When you have trouble seeing the outcome in a situation, do you keep up the conversation with God? How is it that you demonstrate your faith in God?

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Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

Season 2, Episode 19
(First aired April 1, 2005)
“Trial and Error”

By Teresa Blythe

There’s real guilt—what we feel when we have been destructive and hurt someone—and then there’s imagined guilt—what we feel because we think we are responsible for all the ills of the world, even if we aren’t. Both play a big part in this episode.

Adam feels real guilt over betraying Joan’s love by having an illicit and demeaning sexual affair with Bonnie. James, a man who confesses to a murder he didn’t commit, feels imagined guilt when he views the body of a slain little girl in the morgue where he works. James confuses the extraordinary sadness and pain of losing his own daughter with guilt, convincing himself that he could ease the pain of the murdered girl’s family if someone is arrested and convicted of the crime.

Confession—admitting to God those times and places where we “miss the mark” and fail to act out of love—frees us from real guilt, especially if our confession is lived out in a conversion or “turning around” to new life.

Of course, no one ever said this confession or “turning around” business was easy. Joan learns by “trial and error” that both guilt and innocence are painful states. Still, the only one in this episode to get a hug from God is the innocent and betrayed Joan.

Episode-in-a-nutshell

God asks Joan to participate in a mock trial. She ends up being the prosecutor, winning her case against Jack, of “the beanstalk” fame.

Adam “hooks up” (has casual sex) with Bonnie, hoping the trysts will never come to light, and telling Bonnie that he is in love with Joan. His guilt overflows when he confesses to Grace and then finally to Joan, who breaks off the relationship.

In a confirmation class on “confession,” Lilly confesses to Helen that she is dating Kevin and that they are happy together. Helen feels some tension and anger about this, mostly because she fears losing Lilly’s friendship if Lilly and Kevin break up. Helen takes her anger to confession and then makes an effort to be open to the new relationship after the priest encourages her to “act on her confession.”

A grieving morgue worker falsely confesses to the murder of a little girl, hoping to help the girl’s family reach closure. Will notices a discrepancy in the case and uncovers the fraud.

Questions for discussion

- Locksmith (God) bumps into Joan in the school hallway and apologizes, saying she (God) was at fault. Joan replies, “God feels guilt?”—a question God doesn’t answer. What do you think? Does God ever feel guilt or remorse? Can you think of a story in the Bible in which God was portrayed as expressing sorrow over what humans interpreted as an “act of God”? Read the aftermath of the flood story, Genesis 8:20-22, and discuss Joan’s question about God and guilt. Read the story of the people of Israel and the golden calf, Exodus 32: 1-15, and discuss the same question.
- Lilly describes for Helen the sacrament of reconciliation,* which in the Catholic church includes the act of confessing one’s sins. Lilly says confession is not about “feeling bad.”



Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

“Trial and Error”—page 2

- Confession is a sacrament used to celebrate God’s limitless capacity to forgive. He knew how guilty we’d feel all the time so He gave us a way to deal with it, a way to be honest and still be loved, no matter what. —Lilly
- What is your experience of confession? Does it mirror what Lilly describes?
- Skinny kid (God) reminds Joan that symbols and metaphors stir up a lot of passion. Can you think of some symbols and metaphors in our culture that are stirring up passion? What do they stand for? How do you react to them? How do others react? Does everyone agree on what the symbol means or the feeling it evokes? Why or why not?
- Adam’s “hook up” with Bonnie ends up hurting several people. How is his casual attitude toward sex destructive? What does your faith teach you about sexual responsibility?
- How does Adam’s relationship with Bonnie affect his relationship with Joan? What was your reaction to seeing Adam and Bonnie together? What is Adam’s responsibility to Joan in this situation? What is his responsibility to Bonnie? What is the most ethical action he could take? Was Adam’s confession to Grace in any way similar to the confession that Lilly explains to Helen (see quote above)?
- When Helen goes to confession, Father Ken tells her it’s not enough just to say the words of confession, but confession needs to be accompanied by a change in actions. When you tell someone you are sorry for something you’ve done, do you accompany that apology with a changed action? What role does the action play in forgiveness? Read the story of the woman caught in adultery, John 8:1-11, and ask that same question.
- God praises Joan’s “innocence” in the face of Adam’s betrayal, saying that innocence is “a state of being, without deceit or selfishness. It’s having the faith that there’s goodness even in the face of cruelty and pain.” Using that definition, do you see yourself as an “innocent?” When did you last face cruelty and pain? Did you keep your faith in a good God?
- If you were Joan, how would you have handled Adam’s confession of betrayal?
- Different Christian denominations celebrate different numbers of sacraments. Catholics have seven—baptism, eucharist, reconciliation, marriage, confirmation, last rites, and holy orders. Many Protestant denominations observe two—baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Quakers and the Salvation Army make no use of sacraments, at least not in an outward manner.

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Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

Season 2, Episode 20
(First aired April 8, 2005)

“Spring Cleaning”

By Teresa Blythe

“Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean.” —Psalm 51:7

The Psalmist writes here of a ceremony, using the cleansing powers of the hyssop bush, symbolizing the sinner washed clean by God’s mercy. In “Spring Cleaning,” Joan spends considerable time with God discussing the virtues of cleaning up the messes in our life—especially those messes we don’t want to look at.

For Joan that means the mess of anger she’s built up against her ex-boyfriend Adam for his betrayal when he engaged in casual sex outside their relationship. At first Joan tries to cut all memories of Adam out of her life. When that doesn’t work, God advises that she confront “the big stain on the carpet.” She does this by seeking Adam out and admitting the truth that what they had—when it was just the two of them—was good.

How we are cleaned by God’s mercy is the mystery of grace. In *Joan of Arcadia*, the images of God seem to promote human responsibility to “roll up our sleeves” and do the work of cleaning. And, certainly we have to do our part. But the gift of grace is that God meets us in our effort and does so much more of the cleaning than we ever could do. That’s why the Psalmist later says to God, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10). We simply cannot do the cleaning on our own.

Episode-in-a-Nutshell

God tells Joan to “clean” in order to change her perception and heal her hurt. So Joan cleans her room and returns a lot of small gifts that Adam gave her.

Kevin starts looking for his own place, at Lilly’s prompting. Helen finds this upsetting—that Kevin would want to live alone, presumably so he could pursue a sexual relationship with the ex-nun (who is Helen’s theological and spiritual advisor).

Joan’s guidance counselor is falsely accused of “inappropriate relationships with students.” Since he loaned Joan some CDs and books, Joan is questioned about his relationship with her, which she feels was perfectly innocent. The mess affects a change in the counselor, who begins to act more like an adult in his private life.

Questions for Discussion

- Joan jokes with Garbage man (God), “If I were God, I’d give myself better jobs.” In considering the God revealed in the Bible, what kind of jobs does this God take on? What kind of work did Jesus take on? Which societal roles did Jesus elevate and how?
- Salesman (God) tells Joan to “roll up her sleeves” and keep cleaning because “there is no such thing as a stain that cannot be removed.” Read Psalm 51. What does this Psalm say about the stain of our sins? How is it similar to what Salesman (God) told Joan? How is it different?
- A theme in this episode is that “if we ignore a mess, it gets bigger.” How quickly do you go about cleaning up the messes in your life? Have you ever ignored a mess? What happened?

- Grace worries that Luke’s personality changed when he wore the leather jacket she gave him. How does our outward appearance reflect what we are going through on the inside? What were some of the emotions Luke and Grace appeared to be experiencing and how did those emotions play into Grace’s buying of the jacket and Luke’s wearing of the jacket?
- Tough Guy (God) talks to Joan about “how hard it is to look at your own dirt.” Do you find it difficult or easy to “look at your own dirt?” When you do take a hard look at your shortcomings, how do you treat yourself? Are you forgiving? Do you make amends? How do you acknowledge the sin and brokenness in your life?
- Tough Guy (God) reminds Joan that one big stain remains in her life. What is God referring to? What is the one big stain that lingers in your life? How would it best be cleaned?
- When a stain in our life comes clean, who has done the work—us or God, or both? How do you determine where your responsibility to clean up a part of life begins and ends? How do you determine what is best left to God?
- At the end of the episode, Joan approaches Adam to get all his gifts back. Is Joan forgiving Adam in that scene? If you think she is, explain how you make that determination. If not, explain that as well. How do you release anger held inside you after a betrayal? How do you talk it over with 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.

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Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

Season 2, Episode 21

(First aired April 15, 2005)

“Common Thread”

By Teresa Blythe

“All of creation shares a common thread, like your scarf. How you use the thread becomes the pattern of your life.”—*Park Ranger (God) to Joan*

In contemporary Western culture there is an emphasis on autonomy and individualism. We are urged to “take care of ourselves,” “look out for number one” and “be our own person.” Yet no matter how we may try, we will always be intricately connected with other people and, in fact, all of creation. We are not just individuals, but individuals-in-community, inter-dependent on one another. It is both a fact of life and a gift from God.

The writer of the Book of Acts tells us that early Christians not only understood their connectedness to one another—they built a community devoted to it. “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44–45).

Living with an awareness of how we are all connected, and how we are called by God to respond with compassion and wisdom to these connections, is the way of Jesus. It’s a lifelong process that develops, as Park Ranger (God) says to Joan, “strength, understanding and faith.”

Episode-in-a-nutshell

The man who raped Helen many years ago wants to apologize to her before he dies while in hospice care. Helen agrees to see him, and then flares up in anger as he apologizes.

God asks Joan to start knitting again (“It’s the new yoga!”). Adam loses his job at the advertising firm and looks to Joan for sympathy, but Joan isn’t ready to be his friend after the break-up. Adam goes off on a hiking trip alone and doesn’t return at the end of the day. Another young man in the woods that day, Ryan Hunter, locates him.

Luke gets high on marijuana with Friedman, and misses an important call from Grace, who is worried about Adam. When Luke tries to make Grace understand what he did, she gets angry because she knows all too well the dangers of substance abuse (her mother is an alcoholic).

Questions for discussion

- If you were in Helen’s shoes, and a person who violently attacked you years ago wanted to seek your forgiveness, would you approach that person? Why or why not? As a Christian, what does God require of us when it comes to forgiveness?
- What is the lesson God wants Joan to learn from knitting? How do your hobbies connect with your inner life? What have you learned about life with God from your favorite hobbies?
- Old Lady (God) encourages Joan to appreciate her “imperfections” and tells her the story of the Persian Rug Flaw. What is your most prominent “Persian Rug Flaw?” How does it make you who you are? What have you learned from your flaw?



Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

“Common Thread”—page 2

- Why do you think Luke agreed to try marijuana with Friedman? What was the outcome? What are the ethical issues involved in Luke and Friedman using medical marijuana for a recreational high? What is your moral stance on recreational drug use? How does your faith inform that stance?
- The title of this episode is “Common Thread.” What is the common thread running through both Joan’s and Helen’s lives? What is God’s explanation of the common thread that binds all of creation?
- Read the story of the first converts to Christianity in Acts 2:37–46. What did this community do “in common”? How did they take care of one another? What does their community have in common with some of the communities you are connected with? How is it different? What would the world be like if everyone’s material needs were met by their community?
- Joan wonders if Park Ranger (God) cares about Adam because all the efforts to find him had—up to that point—failed. How does God respond to our pleas to help our friends and loved ones who are lost and distraught?
- God tells Joan that we are connected with all of life, much like the scarf is knit from one piece of yarn. In what way are you connected with someone on another continent? How are you connected to a mountain, a river or a bobcat? What is your connection with planets in the rest of the universe?
- God playfully tells Joan to take life “one stitch at a time.” In what way was Joan trying to get ahead of herself? How do you balance your concern for the future with a concentration on “the here and now?”

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Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

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Season 2, Episode 22

(First aired April 22, 2005)

“Something Wicked This Way Comes”

By Teresa Blythe

For the two seasons that *Joan of Arcadia* has aired, Joan Girardi has dutifully carried out the specific tasks God gives her. Most of the problems she encounters along the way have been ones caused by her own doubt, misunderstanding or brokenness. Now, at the end of season two, Joan faces a disturbing force outside herself—a spiritual adversary—in a charming and mysterious man named Ryan Hunter. Like Joan, he talks with God, but seems “off-kilter” and possibly dangerous.

Is Ryan the “something wicked” that the title of this episode refers to? Joan calls him evil, but God stops short of personifying evil in that way, saying only that humans have free will to make choices for good or for evil. God calls Ryan a connection. And Joan is to be the “counterbalance” in the connection.

Interestingly, we find out that Joan’s mother, Helen, possesses just the spiritual gift that Joan needs in the face of her adversary—discernment of spirits. This gift is mentioned in Paul’s writings to the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 12:1–11) and New Testament scholars believe what Paul is referring to is the ability to distinguish between true and false prophecies. In other words, it is being able to distinguish the voice of God over and above all the many different voices in culture that call to us, asking for our loyalties.

For Joan to pass this latest test from God, she will most certainly need to call on the spiritual gifts of her mother and other loved ones. It is the gift of community that she has needed all along.

Episode-in-a-nutshell

After dreams and visions of friends lost to her in death, Joan is approached by Little Girl (God), who tells her she is being prepared for a big test in life. It is one that will help her understand her initial question to God, “Why me?”

Mysterious do-gooder Ryan Hunter seems suspicious to Joan, but she has a hard time convincing others of her suspicions. Ryan and Joan discuss their common trait—they both see and talk with God. But Ryan doesn’t share Joan’s trust in God. Joan comes to understand that, in some way, Ryan is her spiritual adversary.

Helen has a dream about vandals attacking her church. Later that day she finds out it really happened. Then, the synagogue where Grace’s father serves as rabbi is set on fire by an arsonist. These attacks cause strong feelings of sadness and grief for Will, Helen, Lilly and Grace. In Will’s case, he is surprised that he feels so strongly since he’s not “the religious type” anymore.

Questions for discussion

- In Joan’s opening dream sequence Judith tells her “there’s a world beyond your eyes and I’m in it.” What do you believe about “the world beyond your eyes”?
- Lilly defines a “charism” as a divine spiritual talent given to people for the good of the community. Using that definition, what charism has God given to you?
- Read the New Testament passage Lilly is referring to, 1 Corinthians 12:1–11. Can you name people who possess the gifts Paul mentions in verses 8–10? What are some other gifts of the Spirit that are not listed here?



Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

“Something Wicked This Way Comes”—page 2

- For the two years that the series has run, Will has never shown much inclination toward religion. Yet after viewing the destruction of the church, he makes the sign of the cross. What is it about this incident that stirs Will to such an act of devotion?
- Lilly gets testy with both Helen and Kevin while cleaning up the church mess. She accuses Helen of “just dabbling” in religion and Kevin of only being interested in the vandalism as news. What seems to be making Lilly so upset?
- When the synagogue that Grace’s grandfather built is hit by arson, Helen comments, “Thank God no one was hurt.” Grace replies, “ Too bad God didn’t have a hose.” Whose response do you identify more with? Why? What conundrums arise when we ascribe to God responsibility for everything that happens?
- Ryan Hunter is posed—in this episode—as an adversary to Joan. What is an adversary? Have you ever faced a spiritual adversary? If so, what did you learn from the experience? What is the significance of God appearing and talking with a person who so clearly dismisses God as ruler of the universe?
- Joan believes Ryan vandalized the church and set fire to the synagogue. Does she have any proof of this? How does a person test their intuition to find out if it is leading them in the right direction?
- Cute Boy (God) tells Joan he expects her to provide “counterbalance” in the world. What does that mean? How might she provide this counterbalance? How do you serve as a counterbalance to sin, evil and destruction in the world?
- The episode ends with God telling Joan she has “everything she needs.” How has Joan been prepared for this task? How will each of her friends be able to help her with the task?
- How do you discern whether a person, a feeling or a situation is leading you toward God or away from God?

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