



Joan of Arcadia Study Guide

Discussion helps from *Presbyterians Today* magazine

Season 1, Episode 1

(First aired September 26, 2003)

“Pilot”

By Teresa Blythe

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

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

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

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

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

Episode-in-a-nutshell

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

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

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

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

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

Questions for discussion

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

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