Study Guides for ‘Joan of Arcadia’

One of best new dramas of the 2003-04 season has been CBS’ “Joan of Arcadia” (Friday, 8 p.m. ET/PT). It debuted with CBS’ best rating in that slot in three years. It recently won a People’s Choice Award for best new TV drama, and the American Film Institute recognized the show as a 2003 Program of the Year.

Amber Tamblyn plays Joan Girardi, a high-schooler ordinary in every way except one: God, in various guises, regularly drops by to help her deal with teenage trials and tribulations.

Teresa Blythe, a noted writer on religion and popular culture, has authored free online study guides for groups wishing to use the show to explore their relationships to God.

Blythe co-wrote Watching What We Watch: Prime-Time Television Through the Lens of Faith, and her Meeting God in Virtual Reality: Using Spiritual Practices with Media will be released in April. She graduated from San Francisco Theological Seminary, and, in addition to writing, works at Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz.

The online guides are housed at Presbyterians Today, which is also sponsoring an online discussion group for the show.

Blythe has authored a general guide for “Joan” (which includes a series overview and questions for discussion), as well as mini-guides for specific episodes.

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

Some general questions that Blythe suggests about the show include:

- What is the nature of God as God appears here?
- What are some of God’s characteristics?
- Compare the image(s) of God shown in this clip or episode with images of God found in the Bible.

These questions are especially relevant because Barbara Hall, the show’s creator,
has said God—on the show—will not prefer a specific religion. In fact, religion plays a minimal role on the show, if any at all.

“There are few references to church or a religious community,” Blythe wrote about “Joan of Arcadia.” “When religious leaders appear on the show, they are usually not helpful, which leaves Joan pretty much on her own with God.”

The mini-guides for each episode feature an “episode-in-a-nutshell” section, as well as questions specific to that installment. The first mini-guide available is for episode six, “Bringeth It On.”

“Joan of Arcadia” is, without a doubt, an ideal show for analyzing one’s own beliefs about God, so these guides are welcome. Similar endeavors—like Joey Fann’s popular Bible study that uses “The Andy Griffith Show” for moral reflection, or the free study guides available at MovieMission.com for using films to explore faith and belief—are proving useful and sought after.

Blythe’s guides are further proof that skilled individuals are making solid and relevant resources available online. You just have to know where to look; in this case, it’s at Presbyterians Today.


Cliff Vaughn is culture editor for EthicsDaily.com.

Also read this EthicsDaily.com article:

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Teresa Blythe’s Web site is here