**Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret: Listening for God’s Still Small Voice**

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In the screen adaptation of the Judy Blume book, a young girl learns that God doesn’t always speak in grand gestures.

*Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* is ultimately a story about change. At the beginning of the film, which is adapted by writer-director Kelly Fremon Craig from Judy Blume’s quintessential coming-of-age book, Margaret Simon (Abby Ryder Fortson) finds out she is moving to New Jersey and will have to leave her friends and beloved grandmother, Sylvia (Kathy Bates). The first time she utters those famous title words, she begs God: “Please don’t let New Jersey be too horrible.”

Margaret is changing locations while on the brink of her own physical changes. Craig [points out](https://lithub.com/how-one-young-screenwriter-snagged-the-rights-to-are-you-there-god-its-me-margaret/) in an interview that “all of that uncertainty drives her to search for something greater beyond herself, to wonder, ‘Is anyone up there making sure I’m going to be OK?’”

Margaret’s mother, Barbara (Rachel McAdams), was raised Christian and her father, Herb (Benny Safdie), was raised Jewish; they’ve decided to raise Margaret with no religion, allowing her to choose for herself. With no framework for how to approach God or prayer, Margaret feels lost at sea, especially when she can’t find God in the ways she expects. She views him as a cosmic Santa, asking him to expedite her development into a woman and becoming frustrated when that doesn’t happen.

Soon after arriving at her new home, Margaret meets her neighbor Nancy (Elle Graham), who presents herself as an all-knowing prophet on the process of becoming a woman—despite being just as lost as Margaret. Nancy inducts Margaret into her secret club along with two other girls: Gretchen (Katherine Mallen Kupferer) and Janie (Amari Alexis Price). She then elects herself the leader, imposing outlandish rules on the girls and telling them false rumors about the sexual behavior of the early bloomer in their class, Laura (Isol Young), whom they all envy.

After Margaret reveals to her teacher, Mr. Benedict (Echo Kellum), that she doesn’t like religious holidays, he encourages her to do her research project on religion to investigate her conflicted feelings. Thus, she begins to search for God in new places. She goes to temple with her grandma, a gospel church with Janie, and Christmas mass with Nancy. She expects to be struck by divine providence and handed the correct answer, but none of these experiences meet her expectations. She doesn’t feel anything.

Margaret is assigned a group project with Laura, who mentions she has to go to confession. She explains the concept to Margaret, giving her yet another flavor of religious practices. When Laura alleges that Margaret is cheating on the project, Margaret makes a snide comment about the false rumors she has been fed about Laura. After a half-hearted apology from Margaret, Laura rebukes her for participating in bullying and ostracizing her for the way she looks. Margaret follows Laura into church and goes into a confessional. She is so ashamed of her behavior that she can only muster a timid, “I’ve done something awful,” before running out. She laments being unable to find that feeling she’s looking for and asks God, “Why do I only feel you when I’m alone?”

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This scene calls to mind the passage from [1 Kings](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Kings%2019%3A11-13&version=NIV) where Elijah, fearing for his life after being threatened by Queen Jezebel, goes into the wilderness alone and prays out of desperation for the Lord to take his life. Three forces emerge in response: a “great and powerful” wind, an earthquake, and fire, but the text tells us that the Lord was not in any of these. Then came, as described in the King James version, “[a still small voice](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Kings+19%3A+9-18&version=KJV).” Elijah encountered God, only not in the way he expected.

In Ruth Haley Barton’s book [*Invitation to Solitude and Silence*](https://bookshop.org/p/books/invitation-to-solitude-and-silence-experiencing-god-s-transforming-presence-ruth-haley-barton/10983334?ean=9780830835454&gclid=CjwKCAjw9J2iBhBPEiwAErwpef0HqJKDH6y8KvAn-YEW9dVXOgJbuEdT2rqDH6nfm10ChSLBEORqZRoCLM8QAvD_BwE), which is built around the passage in 1 Kings, she writes about feeling spiritually lost in her hectic life. She speaks with a spiritual director, who says, “You are like a jar of river water all shaken up. What you need is to sit still long enough that the sediment can settle and the water can become clear.” Sometimes we need to take a step back from the “noisy, peopled places” of our lives and “give in to desperation and desire until God comes to us and does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.”

When you’re young and things don’t go according to plan, it appears as if the world is ending. Everything seems to be going great for Margaret until she begins to see the truth about Nancy’s false front, is mocked by the popular boy she thought liked her, and is pushed to her breaking point at a family gathering by both grandma Sylvia and her estranged Christian grandparents, who try to force their respective religions on her. Through the chaos, she can’t tune in to the still small voice of God.

Margaret concludes her research project, saying, “What I learned about religion is it makes people fight . . . maybe the truth is no one is out there.” It isn’t until she experiences some solitary and silent reflection—crying alone in the bathroom and quietly sitting with her mom—that Margaret begins to open herself to a still small voice working in her life. At an end-of-school fair, Mr. Benedict apologizes to Margaret for his inexperience as a teacher. She responds that he was the best teacher she could have had, since he suggested Margaret investigate these spiritual questions in the first place. She then extends an olive branch to Laura and asks her to dance, signaling a budding new friendship. Perhaps there is a whisper of God's still, small voice in these authentic, formative relationships.

Both Elijah and Margaret expect God to appear to them in some grand way, but they get the opposite. We may know or *think* we know how God works, but it is impossible for any of us to truly know God's ways. Instead of seeking out God in the ways we want, let us listen in the stillness and open ourselves to the mysteries of God.



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