

TEACHING TOLERANCE



MIDDLE & UPPER GRADES ACTIVITY

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HANDOUT 1

Josiah – 1620

You are seventeen years old and the oldest of five children. Until very recently you were the oldest of six children, but your baby sister died. Your family did everything to save her but it wasn't to be. Your family traded food for fuel (firewood) in order to bring some heat into your home but neither the warmth the fire provided nor the medicine your mother scraped together seemed to do any good. So, after three weeks of wrangling, worry and ravage sickness, your sister died. You had seen death before...it certainly wasn't the first time...friends of yours, older neighbors, some of your own families barnyard animals and the little brother that was brought into the world stillborn. But the death of your baby sister you fear just might break your mother, and with her, your family.

It makes you think again about the New World. Every time there is struggle in your family, which has been often in your seventeen years, you begin to feel the weight of your age and the weight of responsibility for your family. You see that the amount you eat takes away from what the others can eat while the amount you contribute dwindles to nothing as the crops will not grow, the land shrinks, and no one asks you for part time work like they used to.

You first began to think of the New World four or five years ago. It was then that errands and small jobs for farmers near your home took you past the alehouse fairly often. In the small town near your family farm, the alehouse is the center of all male social and intellectual activity. Officially you were forbade from going anywhere near it much less inside it by your mother, but as you grew more aware of the world and how things were you couldn't help but be drawn to it. When running errands or doing small jobs for neighbors if it involved going to town you would make sure your path took you past it and you would run your errand so you could walk slowly by to listen to the heated conversations and guffaws. None of the men seemed to notice you so you could even sometimes stand near them as they rocked and smoked on the front porch arguing and joking or even lean against one of the supporting beams behind them looking in the windows and listening.

One of their key arguments that they always seemed to be talking about was whether or not the younger men and women (but mostly men) should sell themselves into indenture or not. Some of the older men were considering allowing or even encouraging their children to sell themselves into indenture. It took you several visits to the alehouse before you began to understand what an indentured servant was. It came more into focus when you saw some advertising notices on the outside wall of the alehouse encouraging people to sell themselves into indenture. You couldn't read, but from the pictures and what people told you, ads made it seem like indentured service would lead you to the promised land.

You knew that to indenture yourself you had to sell yourself to a ship's captain who would then sell you to farmers in the New World who needed workers. You knew from the overhead alehouse conversations that the ship's captain would then auction you off on the dock and you would be owned by a farmer for 4-7 years (most likely closer to 7). That part didn't bother you. You were young, smart, and capable. You couldn't imagine anyone working you harder than your father already did, but what was most enticing is what would happen when the indenture was over, you were free...FREE!...and living in the New World. You knew the work would be hard that the majority of buyers of indentured servants were tobacco farmers and that planning and harvesting tobacco was backbreaking, soul draining, down right hard work. But, you were unafraid. You'd heard that some former servants were given money at the end, enough to buy some land of their own, but even if they weren't, you were free to hire out your services to whomever

would pay to save for a homestead of your own. You'd heard that many of the indentured servants headed out to the frontier, that patch of land between civilization and the savage lands of the Indians, but like the hard work, that didn't frighten you but excited you a little. You'd heard also that marriage was often forbidden because the pregnancies that resulted caused a disruption of work, which resulted in a longer indenture to make up for lost time

You had just finished running an errand for your father and of course had slowly walked by the alehouse and were heading home, your head filled with the dreams and wondrous possibilities of the New World. As you approached your house, your overcrowded house filled with sadness, loss, poverty, hunger, and the weight of the knowledge that you were only adding to the stress made your decision incredibly easy.

SOURCES

Red, White, and Black: The People's of Early North America by Dr. Gary B. Nash
Major Problems in American Colonial History by Dr. Karen Ordahl Kupperman
Give Me Liberty! An American History by Dr. Eric Foner
A People's History of the United States by Dr. Howard Zinn

Answer the following questions:

1. What are the difficulties that Josiah is facing in his life?

2. What can Josiah do to change his circumstance?

3. What is an indentured servant?

4. How long is an indentured servant forced to be indentured?

5. What type of work were indentured servants set to do in the New World?
