The Pilgrims’ Courageous Journey

• **Compelling Question**
  o How does having the courage to preserve in the face of hardship help us fulfill our purpose?

• **Virtue:** Courage

• **Definition** – Courage is the capacity to overcome fear in order to do good.

• **Lesson Overview**
  o In this lesson, students will learn about the incredible journey of the Pilgrim fathers took before landing at Plymouth Rock and settling in the New World. They will learn about the numerous setbacks they had to overcome in their journey and come to understand the courage often required to accomplish one’s purpose.

• **Objectives**
  o Students will analyze the courage required by the Pilgrims in making their journey across the Atlantic.
  o Students will understand how they can be courageous in their own lives
  o Students will apply their knowledge of courage in their own lives

• **Background**
  o The story of the Pilgrims began in the rural Nottingham-Yorkshire region of England. It was there that a small congregation of separatists from the Church of England, who called themselves “Puritans”. They believed that the Church of England had lost its way and was no longer worshiping God as it should. They, therefore, met secretly on their own. Over the past decades, pressure had been building upon separatist groups like the Puritans. The government of England saw these religious dissenters as a threat to the fabric of English society. The Puritans knew full well the risks they were running. They continued to meet, even though their doing so was in clear violation of ecclesiastical and civil law.

In 1607, the Bishop of York became aware of their meetings and began to crack down on the separatists. They knew they could no longer exercise their faith in England. How daunting and lonely a time this must have been. Forced to choose between their home and their faith, they must have felt utterly abandoned by their country. They knew they had to leave the world they knew for one that provided at least the potential of freedom.

The decision to escape to Holland was not an easy one. In the age before reliable and quick transportation, most rural peoples never traveled more than a few miles from their home in their lifetimes. The world beyond their villages and counties was utterly foreign to them. The sense of the unknown when thinking of heading across the channel must have been overwhelming. Making their escape even more difficult was the government of England, who would not allow anyone to leave without permission from the Once again, they found themselves in conflict with the law, forcing them to escape as they had worshiped, in secrecy.

When they arrived in Holland, they were greeted by a strange city that differed in culture and size from their home villages. The city of Leiden where they settled was home to tens of thousands of people. The sites and sounds of a city this size must have been overwhelming to those used to the quiet English countryside. The busy commercial city was distinctly opposite from the slow paced and seasonal life the English farmers had grown up with. The ceaseless activity of the town must have been exhausting. It was not long before the culture and character of the city began to separate them from the agrarian English values and heritage they prized. They knew they could not stay.

Compounding issues further was the relationship between England and Holland. The English government continued to keep tabs on the separatists and attempt to persecute them from across the English Channel. When they discovered an English separatist was printing pamphlets critical of the governance of the Church of England, they demanded their arrest. It was time to go.
But where could they go and still maintain their heritage and lifestyle they wished? Continued religious and political unrest on the continent of Europe meant moving further inland was not an option. So they looked west, to a new and unknown world.

- **Vocabulary**
  - Rural
  - Ecclesiastical
  - Holland
  - Agrarian
  - Separatist
  - Turbulent
  - Joint-stock company
  - Congregation
  - Rendezvoused
  - Plodded
  - Gale
  - Covenant
  - Persecuted

- **Introduce Text**
  - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.

- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
  - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
    - What challenges are you facing?
    - What fears or concerns might you have?
    - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

- **Observation Questions**
  - Who were the Pilgrims?
  - Why were they willing to risk the voyage to the new world?
  - What does the Pilgrims courage say about their identity as a community?

- **Discussion Questions**
  - Discuss the following questions with your students.
    - What is the historical context of the narrative?
    - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
    - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
    - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
    - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
    - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
    - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
    - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?

- **Additional Resources**
Handout A: The Pilgrims’ Courageous Journey

Background

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Narrative

In 1620, the Pilgrims undertook an arduous voyage across the Atlantic to North America. The settlers had to overcome uncertainty, disease, hunger, cold and apprehension. The story of the Pilgrims is truly one of determination and courage.

The decision of the Pilgrims to settle in North America created immense challenges. First and foremost they would need permission to settle on the crowns lands there and support to finance the expedition. If they could secure financing, they would need to obtain a ship and a crew willing to make the dangerous and long journey. They needed to buy supplies enough to not only get them across the ever turbulent north Atlantic, but also then have enough to allow them to settle in the new continent. They knew almost nothing of this new continent. Unknown Indians, animals, and weather all awaited them on a cold and unknown shore.
The trip was not unprecedented. The Jamestown colony had been established in 1607, about 10 years before the Pilgrims would begin to contemplate their journey, and continued to struggle. Many other colonial expeditions had ended in complete disaster. This included another English separatist group who had departed from Holland just a few years before. Tragically, that expedition ended with the deaths of 130 of the 180 settlers.

After much diligence, the congregation was eventually able to secure a patent from the Virginia Company, a private joint-stock venture which technically owned the land in North America protected by the English, in 1619. This patent would allow them to settle in North America and retain a sense of their English identity.

The Pilgrims then set about obtaining a ship and supplies for their voyage. They were eventually to purchase the Speedwell in Holland and hire passage on another ship from England, the Mayflower. The two ships rendezvoused in Southampton in the late summer of 1620 and began to fit out for their journey. They were small, cramped vessels that leaked in heavy seas and lacked any comforts for passengers who were to sail in them.

Finally, after several weeks of outfitting, the ships finally set sail for the New World. They were weighed down with supplies and passengers and plodded heavily through the rough seas of the English Channel. The Speedwell was leaking so badly that they decided they needed to return to England. It was now mid-August, and the Pilgrims were facing the daunting prospect of a fall crossing and winter landing in the New World. Worse yet, the winds had changed, pinning the sailing ships in the harbor at Dartmouth without a chance of getting out. Both ships sat in harbor eating through their precious supplies and praying for a fair wind.

Weeks later, they set sail once again, but the Speedwell sprung another leak, forcing the ships back to port once again. This time they landed in the port of Plymouth, England. It was decided that if they had a chance of making it before winter set in, they would have to leave the Speedwell behind. This meant abandoning a vast amount of supplies, as well as losing the one ship that they owned outright. Other than costing them a significant amount of money, it also deprived them of a tool that they saw as critical to their success in North America. Once the Mayflower left them ashore, they would be stranded.

Finally, on September 6, they set sail for a third time with as many people and supplies packed into the Mayflower as they dared. The ship was cramped, cold, wet and miserable. For the next 65 days, the ship worked its way slowly across the North Atlantic. Fierce gales and rough seas battered the ship. The flying spray and the water that worked through the seams of the ship soaked the passengers. They suffered from sea sickness and the cold and the frustration of being cooped up around the same people with no reprieve for miserable day after miserable day.

Finally, on November 9, 1620, they sighted land. It was not the Hudson River as they had originally intended, but further north off the sandy coast of Cape Cod. It was then that their true test would begin. All of the challenges had been but a prequel to what lay ahead. They found themselves off the coast of an unknown and cold shore with nothing but their wits and supplies to sustain them.

Before they landed, the Pilgrim men convened to form a covenant with God and each other. In their founding political document, the Mayflower Compact, they agreed to “solemnly and mutually in the presence of God, and of one another, covenant and combine ourselves into a civil body politic, for our better ordering and preservation . . . to enact, constitute, and frame, such just and equal laws, ordinances, acts . . . unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.” They built a republican government based upon consent.

The Pilgrims had to overcome great odds just to arrive at this unknown shore. They had been persecuted for their beliefs and forced to leave their homes behind. They had settled on a foreign shore, completely alien in language, appearance, culture and custom. Unable to settle where they wished, they had taken it upon themselves to brave the great-unknown ocean to land upon an inhospitable shore for the mere hope of living life as they wished.

It was at this point that the fight just to survive would begin. The Pilgrims built their homes before the cold New England winter set in. They secured food and water while creating protections against possible attacks from natives in hopes that they would have freedom. Dozens of colonists perished in the harsh winter that followed. By spring, only fifty had survived, and the colony teetered on the edge of collapse. But, they did survive, and by adhering to the principles of their founding, they laid a foundation for future settlers.
The courage of the separatists is something to be admired and followed. They risked it all in the pursuit of their freedom and faith. Without courage, they could have accomplished nothing.