

THEME: The Declaration of Independence

TOPIC: The Meaning of the Declaration of Independence

PREPARATION / PROPS: Poster of the Declaration of Independence, map of the 13 colonies

LESSON: A Letter to King George III. In 1776, soon after the beginning of the American Revolutionary War, the leaders in America got together to write a letter to the King of England. They wanted to explain why they were fighting to be their own country, independent of Great Britain. This is what they had to say (but in easier words):

Sometimes one group of people decide to split off from another group, and to become an independent country, as the laws of Nature and of God say that they can. But when this happens, if they want other people to respect them, they should explain why they are splitting off.

We think these things are obviously true:

- * That all men are created equal
- * That all men have some rights given to them by God
- * That among these rights are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

So whenever any government is getting in the way of these rights, people have the right to change it or get rid of it, and to make a new government, in whatever way seems most likely to make them safe and happy.

People should not change their government without a good reason, so people usually suffer as long as they can under the government they have, rather than change it. But when there have been a lot of problems for a long time, it is their right and their duty to throw off that government, and to set up a better government.

We here in America have suffered for a very long time, and now we should change our government. The king of England has done many bad things to us - here is a list:

- * He won't let us pass laws we need for everybody's good.
- * Even when we do pass laws, he won't sign them so they can go into effect.
- * He tried to force men to give up their right to make laws.
- * He calls men together to make laws in the most inconvenient times and places, so that they won't be able to go discuss the new laws.
- * He won't let new settlers come to America, and he won't let the settlers take over new land from the Native Americans.
- * He won't let us choose our own judges, and instead he chooses them all himself, so they're all on his side.
- * He sends lots of new government officials that we don't want, and he makes us pay for them.
- * He sends lots of English soldiers here when there isn't even a war, and makes us let them live in our own houses.

- * He tells us these soldiers can do whatever they want and don't have to obey the law.
- * He won't let us buy and sell things from wherever we want. We can only buy things from England.
- * He makes us pay all kinds of taxes without asking us about it.
- * He won't let us have a jury for our trials, only a judge.
- * He sends people accused of crimes far away to England for their trials.
- * He tries to get people to revolt and tries to get the "Indian Savages" to attack us.

When we ask him to stop, he just keeps on doing more bad things. We have tried to talk to the other people who live in England. We asked them to stop these crimes against us, but they have acted as though they were deaf. So we have to separate from England, and they will be our enemies during the war, though we hope they'll be our friends when there is peace.

So we think that God will see that we are doing the right thing when we declare that the United States are now completely independent of the King of England. We have no more political connection to England at all. And as independent states, we say that each state has the right to make war, to make peace, to make alliances with other countries, trade with other countries, and do everything else that countries do. And we promise that we will fight for our independence with the help of God - we promise by our lives, our property, and our sacred honor.



Among the men who signed this declaration of independence were Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. This Declaration of Independence was an exciting letter to write - it laid out a lot of new ideas about the rights that all people should have. The Declaration of Independence was a very important statement of the idea that everybody has rights.

DISCUSSION POINTS:

- The signers believed that our rights came from God and not government. What do you think? What are some things that can happen if people think that their rights come from government?
- The colonists were being treated badly as early as 1764 when Great Britain passed the Sugar Act which put a tax on things like sugar and coffee. They wrote the Declaration of Independence in 1776. How many years was that? They put up with bad treatment for 12 years. You aren't even 12 years old! How do you think the colonists felt after 12 years of bad treatment? Do you think people would put up with bad treatment that long today? Why or why not?
- The colonists knew they needed to stand up for themselves. What are some ways you can stand up for yourself? (speak up, question, write letters, petitions, alliances). Can you think of a time when you stood up for yourself? When a friend stood up for himself? When you stood up for a friend?

ACTIVITY: Ask King George

Materials: Purple blanket, paper crown

Method: An adult volunteer wears the paper crown and wraps the purple blanket around themselves like a cape. The kids take turns going to this “King George III” with requests. Examples include: Can I stay up until midnight? Can I have a hamburger for lunch? King George says “NO” every time. The idea is to build frustration to give the campers an idea of how the colonists may have felt.



REFERENCES: <http://www.historyforkids.org/>