

# THE NEW COLOSSUS

EMMA LAZARUS  
1883

## TEXT

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she  
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*

## HISTORY

Immigration has long sparked controversy in America. While 19th century Americans welcomed those who, like them, were Northern European farmers or artisans, they opposed admitting impoverished Southern Europeans, like Italians, and equally impoverished Eastern European Jews. This xenophobic period also saw the passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the end of Reconstruction, the rise of Jim Crow and the Ku Klux Klan, and the persecution of Native Americans across the continent.

Written in 1883, “The New Colossus” asserts that America will be different from ancient empires, that it will welcome even the poorest newcomers: “your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” That, however, was not the message that the French builders of the Statue of Liberty intended. Rather, they saw it as a celebration of the Union victory in the Civil War and gave it to America to mark a common commitment to individual liberty.

Lazarus thus, with a mere 14 lines of poetry, subverts the original intent of the Statue of Liberty. Her words transform this massive civic project into a symbol of open-armed welcome to immigrants arriving from across the Atlantic.

## PRE-SESSION QUESTION

What does the Statue of Liberty mean to you?



## **VALUES TO APPRECIATE IN THE TEXT**

- Shared humanity
- Freedom
- Opportunity

## **INTRODUCTORY ICE-BREAKER**

Where did your family immigrate from and when?

## **POSSIBLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- Begin with the pre-session: What does the Statue of Liberty mean to you?
- From where did your family come before North America?
- How do you react to Lazarus's description of "huddled masses" and "wretched refuse"?
- How does your family's immigration story influence your interpretation of the poem?
- How does immigration or the Statue of Liberty fit into your understanding of the American narrative?

## **POSSIBLE GROUP ACTIVITIES**

- Use a world map to identify the countries everyone has come from.
  - Key question: How can we as a community better appreciate each other's origins?
- Using large flip-chart post-it notes, create a list together - as one group or in small groups - that answers the following question: What were you/your ancestors looking for in coming to the US?
  - Key question: What can we as a community do to help those coming to our community today find what they're looking for?

## **RELATED SCRIPTURE**

## **CLOSING REFLECTION QUESTION**

How has your experience today influenced your thoughts about immigration?