

FOR INTERMEDIATE GRADES: A Vartanantz Learning Exercise

The story of St. Vartan is an extraordinary story of a man who faced impossible odds but marched into battle on the strength of great faith. He was killed and his small Christian army defeated. But that was just the battle. Only a short time later, his valor and that of his fellows set the stage for winning the war.

*Every year, the Armenian Church commemorates this defining moment in our history on the Thursday before the first day of Lent; this year it falls on **February 22**. Review the events with students in a different way this year!*

Make copies and distribute the acrostic puzzle. Have students circle words as you recreate the story of Vartanantz as per the following script.

Find the words **St. Vartan**. Circle only these and even if you discover others as you look, don't circle them until I tell you to.

Who is St. Vartan? (*a warrior, a general, a soldier, a saint*)

Exactly! St. Vartan was one of the most important *nakharars* of the Armenian people. *Nakharars* were something like the nobles of the feudal times in Europe. Anyone know his family name? (**Mamigonian**) Find and circle the name on your sheets. So who was this important nakharar or nobleman? (*Vartan Mamigonian*).

But we always say *Saint Vartan*, don't we? He was a saint and he died for his faith. What do we call someone who dies for his or her faith? (**martyr**). Find that word and circle it. St. Vartan was a martyr. And here's the story of how he and many others died for their faith in our Lord.

At the time of St. Vartan, in the first half of the 5th century, Armenia was divided between the Byzantine Empire in the West and the Persian Empire in the East. There were lots of treaties and tensions between these two powerful forces and Armenia was caught in the middle. One of the most important developments was that the **Persians** (can you find that word now and circle it?) wanted Armenia to convert to their religion of Mazdeism. Their

king—and you probably haven't heard his name before—was **Hazgerd**. Find it in the puzzle and circle it. And another important person was a certain Armenian called Vasag Sewny. Find the word **Vasag** and circle it. Vasag was what is called a *marzbahn*. No, that's not

a candy. It's the name for commanders in Persian Armenia who were appointed by the king. Vasag was an ambitious marzbahn who wanted his fellow Armenians to join Persia mostly so that he himself could be powerful.

Many Persians—whose names I won't mention—were enlisted to pressure the Armenians into converting. Official letters were written demanding their cooperation. Finally the Armenians, under the leadership of Catholicos Hovsep, met at a famous council called the Council of **Ardashad** (find it and circle it now) to decide how they would answer the Persian demands. They drafted letters protesting these demands.

Amazed at this response, the Persian king (what was his name? Yes, Hazgerd) called the Armenian nakharars to Persia to convince them that converting would be in their best interest, but this effort failed. And even when the Persians sent their priests and soldiers to Armenia to tear down churches, build temples, and convert Armenians, they were turned out by humble groups of unarmed protestors, one of whom was the priest **Ghevont**. Find his name in the puzzle and circle it.

Finally, the situation deteriorated into war. On the field of **Avarayr** (and you can look for that word now and circle it) in the year 451, the Armenians fought the Persians in a battle that lasted less than a day. The Persians greatly outnumbered the Armenians and had troops on elephants as well. Vasag Sewny was among



those fighting the Armenians. By the way, Vasag died in disgrace in prison a few years after this battle; he was considered a traitor to his own people even by the Persians!

The Armenians lost. On the battlefield were many saints and martyrs including St. Vartan himself. Shortly after, Ghevont, Catholicos Hovsep and many others were also killed. And we remember all of them on their special feast days each year. St. Ghevont and those with him are remembered two days before Vartanantz.

Their story has been recorded by Armenian historians, but the most famous and the most beautiful is by the vartabed **Yeghishe**, who wrote it that same century. Find his name in the puzzle and circle it. This history happens to exist in a beautiful English translation.

Now what makes this a powerful story is that it is about people struggling to be free, to be Christian, to be Armenian in a world of many other forces. Above all, it is about the most important person the Armenians knew—**Jesus** himself. Circle the name of our Lord in the puzzle. This is who was leading the Armenians and this was who was in their hearts. He still is, don't you think?

It's also a story about courage and staying with the good fight, because eventually, a treaty

was signed with the Armenians thanks to St. Vartan's nephew **Vahan**. Find Vahan's name and circle it. Vahan Mamigonian continued resisting the Persian threat in many different ways and finally won religious freedom through that treaty—the Treaty of Nuvarsag (named after the town where it was signed). Find the words **treaty** and **Nuvarsag** in your puzzle and we've finished the story.

So what did you learn? Let's retell the story quickly together. Use your puzzle as a guide. I'll start the first sentence and we'll each go around and add one. So . . . It's the early 4th century and Armenia is divided between the Byzantine and the Persian Empires. . . . *Now have students take turns continuing the story. Then end by saying:* Great, let's always remember St. Vartan, St. Ghevont and all the men and women who paid the greatest price for their faith—their own lives. And remember too, to keep the faith in every way, great and small, as we read in the New Testament in *2 Timothy 4:7-8*: I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing."

M	K	B	P	E	R	S	I	A	N	S	A
A	V	A	R	A	Y	R	R	I	S	V	G
M	A	R	T	Y	R	A	A	V	N	R	H
I	E	P	R	L	S	N	A	B	K	R	E
G	M	J	E	S	U	S	K	G	Z	U	V
O	V	V	A	H	A	N	V	R	N	E	O
N	W	S	T	G	A	S	R	A	V	U	N
I	T	O	Y	E	G	H	I	S	H	E	T
A	R	D	A	S	H	A	D	Z	U	Y	Q
N	A	T	R	A	V	T	S	Q	U	Y	Z
Q	E	D	R	E	G	Z	A	H	N	V	M

St. Vartan
Mamigonian
martyr
Persians
Hazgerd
Vasag
Ardashad
Ghevont
Avarayr
Yeghishe
Jesus
Vahan
treaty
Nuvarsag