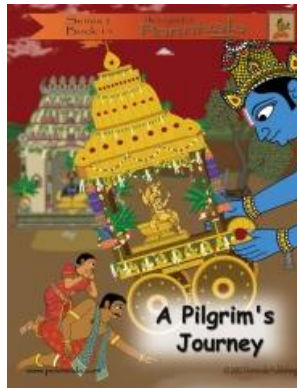


Episode 11 – A Pilgrim’s Journey (Sub Stories a, b, c and d)
Resource Materials: Graphic comic books, ipad books, + videos)
VISIT our SHOP: Choose the retelling that works best for you



11-a) The Heroic Couple Undertake Good Works

Lord Vishnu first asks the couple to build a set of resting stones for people with heavy head loads. He also asks that they construct eating shelters and pay to have public wells dug. He also asks them to marry two particular trees (similar to constructing a local shrine). Most importantly, they are to have a temple cart built for the goddess and then pull it around her temple.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: Many people today do similar things. They plant trees, they help build homes for the poor, they donate to charities and so forth. Tell your own story of someone whose “good works” have impressed you.

COMMENTARY: The things the king and queen need some explanation. The resting stones are like high shelves constructed along a main road that people can rest their head loads on. These shelves are like public benches in a park. Having a shelf at eyebrow height close to a walking path allows someone to rest a head load without having to bend over, set it their burden on the ground and then lift it up again. Eating shelters, where people can rest out of the sun, and digging public wells need little explanation. But marrying two trees may seem odd. The species selected are very specific, ones that will happily grow up together and become “entwined” in a symbiotic way. Such “dual” tree systems usually become small shrines and are worshipped as pleasing examples of positive relationships or “bonding.” Finally, there is the tradition of building temple carts for larger shrines. The god, the goddess, or a divine couple in such a temple are normally worshipped once a year by placing small mobile statues of the particular deity (or deities) high on the cart, in a position of honor, and then the cart is pulled around the temple as a festive celebration that is said to give “joy” to the divinity in question. The Catholic church has similar customs. In many places, a small portable shrine dedicated to a particular saint will be carried in procession through the streets near a popular Catholic shrine on special festival days.

**11-b) The Rival Clansmen Cleverly Plot To Kill
The King and Queen but they Escape**

The rival clansmen hear of the coming festival and the plan to hand pull a new temple cart around the temple. They instruct the carpenters to stop the cart part way. They are to declare that a dream was sent to them by the goddess asking that the king and queen place their heads under its heavy wheels as a powerful sacrifice. They are counting on the couple’s belief in the goddess to

get their agreement. A huge bribe is promised in exchange for this lie. The artisans agree and do as they are told. The devout king and queen do reluctantly place their own heads on the ground in front of the cart's heavy wheels. But with Lord Vishnu's help, the great wagon magically rises up and flies above their heads, causing them no injury! Now we see divine justice at work. The 16 clansmen who were pulling the cart are killed, along with six lying artisans (the 7th escapes).

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: This is the story of a group of villains who fail to obtain their ends and end up getting “harmed” themselves, instead. Many legends and many movies have this kind of plot line. Can you tell a story where someone tells a lie intended to hurt others gets tripped up, and instead ends up being the one to suffer?

COMMENTARY: Pre-existing social disputes often surface during Hindu festivals. This is because during a ritual event every social group, and every key participant, will have a pre-assigned and well-known role to play. If such a group or person is disgruntled they can refuse to do what is expected of them during the ceremonies and thereby hold up proceedings. Many people are kept waiting in such a situation, and so pressure builds to forge a workable compromise. Festivals can actually be good occasions to “study” social tensions. The clansmen's alliance with the artisans and their joint plot to kill the king and queen fits within this wider festival dispute tradition, though the example is a little extreme. This particular sub-story also reminds story listeners of the fact that both the clansmen and the artisans are unhappy with the hero's family. The clansmen believe they are the rightful heirs to the king's palace lands (episode 2-b) and the artisans feel they were unfairly cheated out of land by these same farmers... from the very start (episode 1-b)

11-c) A Vow To Feed The Multitudes

The queen remembers that there are two more important things Lord Vishnu has asked for. They are to feed a thousand beggars and then to travel to heaven and perform penance at the feet of Lord Shiva himself. The feast for the beggars is prepared. But the couple can only find nine hundred and ninety nine beggars, one short of the 1,000 needed to fulfill the vow. The queen sets off to find one more, but there are no more, anywhere. Finally, on the way back she finds a very weak and poor man lying in a ditch. The queen takes this man in her arms and carries him to her palace where she coaxes him into eating a little rice. The vow is fulfilled!

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: Stories from many different religions feature saints or other good people who miraculously feed a multitude. Do you know such a story?

COMMENTARY: At one level this story is a “test” of the queen's generosity and saintliness. It is also an illustration of how the rich were expected to act. Still today many churches, mosques and other religious institutions have a guideline that their followers should give 1/10 of their yearly income either directly to the poor or to the institution that will in turn support good works. Many charities operate on this principle, as do food banks, the goodwill and others.

11-d) The Penitents Begin a 21 Year Pilgrimage

Next the couple begin their pilgrimage to the gates of heaven. First they lock the palace and leave a perpetual lamp burning in the family temple. Next all the people of the area come to say good bye. Even

the animals of Ponnivala appear one by one. They ask that the queen return from heaven with a gift of fertility for them as well. Among the visitors are cows, who ask for calves, and horses who ask for colts. A poor woman from the area asks for the gift of a strong son who can serve as a powerful assistant for the queen's sons-to-be. Finally the couple set off. The four gates to the palace compound are locked and black beetles and wasps are called to stand guard.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES Do you know someone who has gone on a pilgrimage? What was their reason for going? Did they come back satisfied and with a feeling that the trip (and all its difficulties) was worthwhile?

COMMENTARY: Many people undertake pilgrimages, even today. Usually such travelers hope to obtain a divine blessing. Some have taken vows and in return for a gift already received ... and are now saying "thank you." Many people promise to make a visit to a certain shrine if a medical cure is obtained for a loved one, if a scholarship is won, or whatever. When the happy event occurs they must then keep their promise.

In the case of the king and queen in this story, however, their hope is based on obtaining a future reward. The queen is the focus of the journey and Lord Vishnu has put her up to it. Her husband comes along in support, but she is the one who is determined to bear a child.

There is also a sense in which the queen bears the fate of the entire region on her shoulders. . Every person and every animal in the region is suffering. It is a heavy responsibility for the queen to bear. But it is also a sign that her power to achieve such a difficult goal is important. When she can come back from the pilgrimage successful, she will have gained a great deal of respect.

Pilgrimage in medieval times, and even today, was and continues to be a huge educational opportunity. Often this was the only way poor and uneducated people could see something of the wider world. Pilgrims meet people from other lands, people who speak other languages and people whose customs are greatly different from their own. Making a pilgrimage was also one of the few ways that women could "escape" the daily grind of housework and child care. Pilgrimage can represent a real "freedom" from routine and provide the logic for undertaking new and challenging adventures. It is important to understand pilgrimage in its global and historic context. This story is just one way of understanding humankind's age-long desire for travel adventure!