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What Does God Do With a Dream Deferred?

2 Samuel 7:1-14a

Now when the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, 'See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.' Nathan said to the king, 'Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you.'

But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?'

Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.

Seventy years ago, Langston Hughes asked the deep and abiding question, "What happens to a dream deferred?" It is the opening line to his poem "Harlem," which reads:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Hughes was writing from his own experience as a black man in Jim Crow America, and his poetry, taken as a whole, reflects not just on the experience of African Americans at that time - freed slaves and their children - but on the hopes immigrants and people of color have hung upon the so-called America Dream, a reality rarely realized. To encounter this poem is to wonder, first, about the dreams we have, and, then, whose dreams are deferred, and deferred until when? As a straight, cis-gendered, white woman, I know that many of the dreams I've had for myself have been well within my reach. Few of the hopes I have for my daughters will be deferred by glass ceilings, but I know other parents are not at all sure of the future available to their undocumented DREAMer, their non-binary offspring, their child with autism. But deferment doesn't stop us from dreaming. But then, there, is this question, What does God do with a dream deferred?

In today's reading, David, resting from his conquering and having brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem...David, cozy in his palace, dreams of making a palace for God, a house where the ark of God may stay. And God says, no. Well, actually, first God says yes. Yes, you have a house, and, yes, I promise to make of you a house - a long-lived dynasty - but to build for me a house? No, David. That dream is not for you. A dream deferred.

What will God do with our dream, deferred? What of the local businesses, the congregations for whom the pandemic will be the death knell? Who prayed and dreamed of a vibrant, vital future, but will instead walk the holy and hellish path of closure? What of the healing in body, mind, and soul for which we prayed when a life ends in hospice care? A few weeks ago, we had a Zoom call with our siblings in Chichipate, what of their prayers for their young people who, seeing no opportunity to grow and thrive in Guatemala, hand over lifetime's savings to dangerous and unreliable coyotes? What does God do with a dream deferred?

Now, I don't want to take this lightly, the kind of dream Langston Hughes referred to, the kinds of dreams that we see deferred in our day, these dreams are real. They are pressing and urgent. They are not about building luxurious buildings where an elite, chosen few preside. David's dream is that of a conqueror looking to solidify his reign and ensure for himself a lasting legacy. And yet, there is something about this grand dream of the eighth son of a sheep farmer. David was promised nothing in his life other than to hope for the compassion of his big brothers. And yet here he was, King of the People of God, and he did not want to squander that opportunity. But God's answer was to tell David that his

dream was not to be fulfilled in his lifetime. That his dream, deferred, would be rebuilt into the dreams and realities of his children and grandchildren for a great many generations. A dynasty spanning over four centuries. This “no” to David’s dream to build the Temple, was rebuilt into a yes that stretches into our day, a people free to worship God in hope.

When our dreams dry up, crust over, explode, as Hughes predicts, what does God do? When everything we hope for becomes nothing more than sand running through our fingers? When we are reduced to dust, beginning where we started? What then? Then God rebuilds them into the realities that answer the earnest prayers of God’s people the world over. Thom Shuman, a Presbyterian pastor and poet, wrote this poem - probably for Ash Wednesday - called “Ashes of Dreams Unfulfilled” -

Remember you are ashes
of dreams unfulfilled,
of loves burnt in passion,
of sepia-coated photos in our minds;
remember you are dust
of stars which exploded
light-years away,
of words uttered so long ago,
of fears hiding under our bed;
remember you are God’s,
who mixes all the ashes
of our failed promises
to be more faithful
more just
more loving
with the dust we
have shaken from our feet
as we took our own paths,
using them to mark
the Godhead on this
pilgrimage of trust.
Remember,
you are remembered
by God.

What does God do with a dream deferred? Remakes them into something that more closely resembles God’s own dream for a world restored, recreated, remembered. Each time the Temple that David so longed to give to God, each time it was reduced to rubble, it became a chance for the people—not just the ruler, but all the People of God—to draw close to God, to restore relationships with one another, to renew the covenant, to be

revived. What does God do with our dream, deferred? With a no to our long-held hopes? Reduces them to ash and rebuilds them into someone else's yes.

Amen.