

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Pentecost Sunday: A Dream Deferred
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Genesis 11:1-9, Acts 2:1-21

“What happens to a dream deferred?”

Poet Langston Hughes ponders this question in the context of 1950’s America, the Korean War, McCarthyism, and the beginning of the Civil Rights movement. Hughes began writing during the Harlem Renaissance, a period of hope and creativity among black writers, musicians, and artists. But he was criticized by other black poets and authors for parading the unattractive aspects of African-American life before the white audiences of America.

Hughes’ critics wanted to utilize the opportunity of the Harlem Renaissance to mainstream African-Americans into American culture. They wanted to use their creative powers to show white audiences that blacks were equal in stature - respectable, intelligent, and gifted. Hughes, on the other hand, depicted people as he saw them – unique, individual portraits that did not always fit the image of an idealized American.

During the same time as the Harlem Renaissance, a white writer named James Truslow Adams coined the phrase “the American Dream,” a term that came to be synonymous with equal opportunity and upward mobility. What Langston Hughes saw and wrote about was all the ways this idea was bankrupt for people of color. The “American Dream” was a dream deferred. While the term “American Dream” wasn’t coined until 1931, our country has struggled since the beginning with this dream. When our founders asserted that “all men are created equal” and have the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” they were giving these rights only to the white men with voting rights – not women, Native Americans, slaves, and many other immigrants and minorities. Even as the dream of this nation was born, many other dreams were deferred.

The struggle for the American Dream is the struggle of Babel. It is the struggle to be one people with one language. It is the struggle to unify for the purpose of power and achievement. Most of us feel positively about these values, because they have been our values for centuries. With unity comes power, which gives us security and prosperity. We can be autonomous and self-reliant and successful. Who wouldn’t desire these things? But God confused the languages of Babel for a reason. Because God knows the human temptation to act like God, to desire God’s power, to assert God’s authority. And God knows how devastating this can be for the whole creation.

It was this dream of Babel that drove human beings to genocide in the Ottoman Empire, Nazi Germany, Bosnia, Rwanda. The dream of a unified people – one race, one language, one central power.

Building a tower to the heavens, becoming so powerful that nothing is impossible for them, not even the elimination of an entire people.

The Roman Empire had this Babel dream as well. The Pax Romana, or peace of Rome, had at its core the assimilation of conquered peoples. In the East, including Jerusalem, Greek was the language of Empire. With the exception of the Jews, all citizens were required to worship the Roman gods. Local customs, economic systems, and governments were supplanted by the Roman clothing, manners, coins, and rulers. The Babel dream was one Rome, united across many lands and powerful beyond measure.

But this unity came at a cost. Dreams deferred for conquered peoples.

The Jewish dream of the Messiah, God's chosen one, was one of those dreams deferred by the Roman dream of Babel. They had been waiting and hoping for the one who would inaugurate God's supreme reign over all other earthly authorities. Numerous Jews with Messianic aspirations arose around the first century, and all of them were quickly snuffed out. Including a Galilean named Jesus. People had hoped that Jesus would be the one to redeem Israel from her slavery to the Romans. They cheered him like a conquering hero and flocked to him in droves.

But as he gained the attention of Roman authorities, some of his own people criticized him. He didn't follow the Roman custom of dining only with the most important people. He reminded them that their first allegiance was to God, not the Emperor. He taught with the authority of the prophets, not the submission of an assimilated Jew. In order to achieve the dream of Babel, their identity as God's chosen people frequently had to give way to their Roman citizenship.

Finally, the Messianic dream was put to death on a cross.

But it was revived three days later with the news of the resurrection. This dream – of God's kingdom on earth, of salvation for all humanity, and now the added element of life everlasting – was brought back to life. In the days between his resurrection and ascension, Jesus stoked the fires of this dream, promising a power greater than any earthly power, the power of the Holy Spirit.

And on the day of Pentecost, that dream deferred, that dream that has been pent up for so long, finally explodes. With a mighty wind and tongues as of fire, this dream explodes. And the dream of Babel is subverted. The disciples do not share the dream in Greek, the language of Empire, though that would have been the common tongue among all those gathered from the far reaches of Rome. The disciples and the crowd do not suddenly acquire a new language which could unite them all, though that would have been effective in communicating the good news.

The power of this dream is the power of the Holy Spirit, which allows each person to hear, in their own language, the message of Jesus Christ, God's Messiah, the dream of God's people. The diversity God created at Babel, the confusion of languages, stands. And God's Spirit gives the disciples the power to communicate and cross boundaries without assimilation to the Roman Empire or Nazi propaganda or the American Dream.

The Jewish holiday of Pentecost celebrates the giving of the Torah, the formation of Jewish people. And so it is fitting that on this day, God once again formed a people out of the followers of Jesus Christ and all those who hear his message and place their trust in him.

And the truly miraculous thing, the thing that tells us this is God's work and not ours, is that, on Pentecost, a people are made, are unified, not through a single language, race, or culture. They are powerful, but not successful. They are diverse, and become even more so. They are oppressed, and become even more so. And still, they are a people. And they grow. And God's dream is dreamed all over the world today. Prophets and visionaries and dreamers from all walks of life live this dream of a Messiah named Jesus, of salvation for all humanity, of life eternal.

There is no doubt that, as a nation, we are still dreaming of Babel. We talk about wanting a united America, but united by assimilation to our values, our culture, our customs, however we each define them. We talk about bringing back the American Dream, so that we can be more powerful, more secure, more comfortable. But this comes at the cost of other dreams deferred. Oftentimes, our security is the result of someone else's instability. Our power comes from disempowering others. Our comfort comes at the cost of another's discomfort. This is the dream of Babel.

And this dream is not just about politics and business. We dream of Babel every time we demand assimilation from our peers, our neighbors, even those in our congregation. Everyone who's lived through the 7th grade knows what I'm talking about. Dressing alike, using the popular slang words and catch phrases, sitting at the same table in the lunch room. It's all a dream of Babel, it makes us feel more powerful, more safe, more comfortable. And most of us don't grow out of it.

As Christians, this Babel dream is not our dream. We are those people born out of the Pentecost explosion, the people who dream of a Messiah who will inaugurate the reign of God over all earthly authorities. We are those people, unified not by sameness or power but by citizenship in the commonwealth of God, membership in the family of Jesus Christ, and trust in the power of the Holy Spirit.

And this means that we live differently. We are not governed by the expectations of corporate America. We cross borders and boundaries, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to share the good news of Jesus Christ with people of every tribe and nation. The Holy Spirit ignites us, again and again, to subvert that dream of Babel, to speak of the power of God, to relate to all of those gathered in this place – in this city, this state, this nation – from all over the globe, in all our diversity, beyond all our divisions.

What happens to a dream deferred? Does it explode? Yes, yes it does. Thanks be to God.