



Praying with the Poets

T.S. Eliot * Mary Oliver * Emily Dickinson * Langston Hughes * Tagore
Maya Angelo * Jane Kenyon * Dylan Thomas * Rumi * Wendell Berry
Thomas Traherne * Scott Cairns

Community Christian Church – 4601 Main Street – Kansas City Missouri
Session #4 – Langston Hughes

Langston Hughes (1902-1967) – born in Joplin, Missouri, raised in Lawrence, Kansas, and Lincoln, Illinois, Columbia University student, world traveler (Europe and Africa) by the time he was 21, celebrated poet by the time he was 22, a leading light of the “Harlem Renaissance,” graduate of Lincoln University (Pennsylvania), staunch opponent of racial segregation in all of its forms, prolific author (poetry, novels, nonfiction, comic and dramatic plays, opera librettist, movie screenplays, children’s books, memoirs, poetry translations), commissioned historian of the NAACP, attacked by right-wing religious groups, inaccurately slandered as a “communist” – was an unrivaled portraitist of the complexities of American life, particularly from the vantage point of African-Americans. Using an astonishingly sophisticated and nuanced combination of influences and forces – including blues and jazz music, drama, religion, and politics – Hughes came to be the most expressive voice of his generation for those suffering, anguished, and enraged because of experiences of exclusion.

Day #1: Gathering Up- In his poem “Prayer[2],” Hughes calls for sympathetic compatriots to respond to the needs of the world’s dispossessed.

*Gather up
In the arms of the your pity
The sick, the depraved,
The desperate, the tired,
All the scum
Of our weary city
Gather up
In the arms of your pity.
In the arms of your love –
Those who expect
No love from above.*

Pray today by considering how “the arms of your pity” and “the arms of your love” can be sources of grace for significant numbers of folks today.

Day #2: Deep Like the Rivers – In one of his most celebrated poems, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Hughes compares the depth of his soul (as representative of All African-Americans) with the depths of some of the world’s most famous rivers.

*I’ve known rivers:
I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.*

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

*I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.*

*I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.*

I’ve known rivers:

*My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
Ancient dusky rivers.*

Pray today with a deepened appreciation of the inheritance of faith that flows through your soul.

Day #3: Dream Deferred? – In what is perhaps Hughes’ most famous poem, alternately titled “Harlem” and “Dream Deferred,” Hughes gave Lorraine Hansbury the title for one of the most beloved American dramas, “A Raisin in the Sun.”

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?

Pray today for the ceasing of all “deferments” for those who dream. Pray for yourself, that your dreams, even if deferred (and dried up “like a raisin in the sun”), may be revived and come to fruition.

Day #4: For All Children- In "Birmingham Sunday (September 15, 1963)", Hughes mourns the deaths of the four little girls who were killed in the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.

Four little girls
Who went to Sunday School that day
And never came back home at all--
But left instead
Their blood upon the wall
With spattered flesh
And bloodied Sunday dresses
Scorched by dynamite that
China made aeons ago....
Four little girls
Might be awakened someday soon
By songs upon the breeze
As yet unfelt among
Magnolia trees.

Pray today that the disease of white supremacy that perpetrated the gruesome murder of four little girls in a Sunday School class will be eradicated from the face of the earth.

Day #5: No Crystal Stair/Still Climbing - In his poem "Mother to Son," the "mother" of the poem offers to her "son" hard-won wide-eyed frankness about life's difficulties and the gladness of enduring.

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor --
Bare.
But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on,....
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps....
Don't you fall now --
For I've still goin', honey,
I've still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

Pray today for a keen awareness of the twin realities of: (1) the difficulties of daily human life, and (2) the healing, encouraging perspective that this "Mother" is bequeathing to her "Son."

Day #6: Let the Dream Be - In "Let America Be America Again," Hughes fuses his championing of the oppressed with his love for the democratic ideals of the United States.

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.

Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)....

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek--
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak....

Pray today that a new sense of Hughesian hopefulness will be kindled within the broadest reaches of the U.S.

Day #7: Dream On - In his poem "Dreams," Hughes uses the image of "a broken-winged bird" and the frozen-ness of "a barren field" to describe the consequences of a dream-less life.

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

Pray today that God will empower you to be a sensitive steward of your best dreams, that others will hold fast to their own graced dreams, and, thus, that all lives will take winged flight and the fields of our faithful lives will be full of fruition.

LANGSTON HUGHES - Selected Bibliography

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