

Of Such I Dream

February 1, 2026

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Isaiah 61:1-4 (NRSVUE)

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives
and release to the prisoners,
²to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
³to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.
⁴They shall build up the ancient ruins;
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.

*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.)

*Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.*

(It never was America to me.)

*O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.*

*(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")
("Let America Be America Again" – 1935)*

Langston Hughes (1901-1967) shared the voice and the spirit of what it meant to be Black in America. When other poets were turning inward, he turned outward to capture the feelings and experiences of ordinary people; specifically, Black people. For this reason, Hughes became a central figure of the Harlem Renaissance.¹ He wrote novels, short stories, and plays, though he is especially known for his poetry.

*O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where every man is free.
The land that's mine—the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME—
Who made America,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.*

*Sure, call me any ugly name you choose—
The steel of freedom does not stain.
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,
We must take back our land again,
America! ("Let America Be America Again" – 1935)*

The world into which Langston Hughes was born was not an easy one. Reconstruction had failed when White Southern politicians and weak or openly racist leaders from the north abandoned promises made to freed slaves at the conclusion of the Civil War. In its wake followed the era of “Jim Crow” laws, designed to deny Black people the freedoms White people enjoyed. The Ku Klux Klan was on the rise, using fear, intimidation, and violence to enforce a vision of White purity.

The expansion of empires in Europe, increased militarization, and the competition for resources thrust the world into global conflict and the Great War. By 1917, the United States had also been drawn in. Black soldiers fought for democracy with as much courage and valor as White soldiers, yet when they came home, the same social order resumed: Blacks were still denied their place in the American dream. To add insult to injury, they were caricatured in entertainment and popular media, from minstrel shows to political cartoons.

But an unexpected movement was underway as the new decade dawned. Many Black Americans had begun to relocate to cities across the north during what came to be called the Great Migration. Some of the greatest minds and talents converged on Harlem, sparking one of the most significant eras of cultural expression in the nation’s history. Music, painting, sculpture, theater, dance, and especially poetry redefined what it meant to be Black in America, helping reclaim a God-given identity and reshape Black culture. One of the leading figures was a

young Langston Hughes, who had spent his teenage years here in Cleveland, graduating from Central High School in 1920 before embarking on a life of adventure and art. Among his earliest and most celebrated poems is one titled, “The Negro Speaks of 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:
Ancient, dusky rivers.*

My soul has grown deep like the rivers. (“The Negro Dreams of Rivers” - 1920)

Hughes, like many of the leading Black cultural and intellectual leaders, brought a clear-eyed critique of America’s failure to live up to the principles on which it was founded, yet dared to imagine that a nation where “all men are created equal” was still possible.

I, too, sing America.

*I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.*

*Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
“Eat in the kitchen,”
Then.*

*Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—*

I, too, am America. ("I, Too" – 1925)

Today, we recognize the prophetic voice of Langston Hughes and others who held a mirror before American society but also a window looking onto the world as it might be. In doing so, he carried on the legacy of the biblical prophets, who boldly criticized the religious and political leaders of their day while urging them to fulfill God's vision for the world.

Our scripture today comes from Isaiah. This particular passage was written after the Babylonian Exile, when the Israelites had begun to rebuild Jerusalem. Though the physical structure of the city was taking shape, the social, moral, and political reality was far from what God intended. This passage, widely known because Jesus quoted it at the beginning of his ministry, articulates a clear sense of calling:

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives
and release to the prisoners,
(and) to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Isaiah 61:1-2a)*

This passage signals to us the problems in the system they were rebuilding in Jerusalem: economic oppression, unequal access to opportunity, unjust incarceration, crippling debt, collective and overwhelming grief. The reality of life in Jerusalem was nothing like the vision proclaimed by the prophets and dreamed of during exile. But the anointed one was being sent to call the people to a restored vision and a commitment to living up to their high calling. It would not be easy. They would have to repair much that was broken, "the devastations of many generations." But that dream *was* possible...for those with the faith to see it.

Hughes' poem "I Dream a World" strikes a similar tone:

*I dream a world where man
No other man will scorn,
Where love will bless the earth
And peace its paths adorn
I dream a world where all
Will know sweet freedom's way,
Where greed no longer saps the soul
Nor avarice blights our day.
A world I dream where black or white,
Whatever race you be,
Will share the bounties of the earth
And every man is free,
Where wretchedness will hang its head
And joy, like a pearl,*

*Attends the needs of all mankind-
Of such I dream, my world! ("I Dream a World" – 1941)*

It should be noted that Langston Hughes was not universally embraced for his vision nor for his art. He was ignored by many White critics and derided by many Black critics. Being so outspoken about racial equality made him politically unpopular. His curiosity and openness to ideas made him a target of Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s. During the early days of the Civil Rights movement, he was criticized for not being more forceful in his activism and more openly political. He dodged questions about his faith, despite significant pressure to make a public declaration of his religious views. One brief poem states all he had to say on the matter:

*In an envelope marked:
PERSONAL
God addressed me a letter.
In an envelope marked:
PERSONAL
I have given my answer. ("Personal" – undated)*

Through it all, Hughes remained committed to capturing the ethos of what it meant to be Black in America, while clinging to a vision of what it might be.

*O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!*

*Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again! ("Let America Be America Again" – 1935)*

Our focus as followers of Jesus Christ is not geopolitical. We strive to live for Jesus's vision of the kingdom of God. Our interest in America is not because we are called to make America great in and of itself, but simply because it is our home, and we want it to reflect God's vision for the world. We are committed to pursuing God's hope for every life, not just our own or that of the citizens of this country. But if our civic identity is to reflect our faith, then our prayer for our nation should be that it lives up to its highest ideals and foundational principles.

If Hughes were here today, what would he write? Would he note progress over the last half century? Would he celebrate the centering of marginalized voices in art and in the public sphere?

Or would he lament our complacency, the self-satisfaction of a post-Civil Rights society? What would he observe about the way we treat immigrants, the poor, the LGBTQ community, the way we still treat Black and Brown people?

During this Black History Month, we celebrate the legacy of Langston Hughes and so many others who dared to proclaim a vision of justice and equity. But let's do more than that. Let's work to achieve the dream of a world that could be, a dream of a world where all people have an equal claim on life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Let us be a people committed to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Like the biblical prophets, let's hold fast to the dream of the world that God intended. Our work is not complete until that dream is realized.

*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. ("Dreams" – 1922)*

Trust that the God who calls us and challenges us can thaw the frozen progress of our vision and bring forth life again. Let us hold fast to God's dream for us. Amen.



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