

Sunday, August 10, 2025

“What Happens to a Dream Deferred?” | Acts 9:36-43 | Brenda Moten, Seminarian

## INTRODUCTION

There’s a sound a dream makes when it dies. Not a crash or a bang—something quieter. Like air slowly leaking from a balloon. Like a door closing in the distance. Like silence where there used to be music. Most of us know that sound. We’ve heard it in our own hearts when the job didn’t come through, when the relationship ended, when the diagnosis came back, when the call never came. “In 1951, Langston Hughes gave that sound a voice in his poem Harlem, when he asked, ‘

*“What happens to a dream deferred?*

As he mused on that question, he imagined several possibilities:

*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?*

These aren’t just poetic questions. They are spiritual questions that describe, metaphorically, the frustration of a people whose dreams have been stolen, stunted, or blocked – by racism, poverty, injustice, **or** life life-ing.

And let’s be honest: that includes many of us here today. Maybe your dream wasn’t taken by structural racism or systemic poverty – but somehow “deferred,” nonetheless. By closed doors. By unexpected loss. By the slow erosion of time. Or . . . **Fill in the blank.** . . .

And so, you wonder: *Is this dream still alive? Or am I carrying something that’s already gone?*

## WHEN DREAMS ARE DEFERRED

Eight years, 1959, after Hughes wrote that poem, Lorraine Hansberry brought these deferred dreams to life in her stage play “A Raisin in the Sun” through the struggles of an African American family, the Youngers, in Chicago during the 1950s. This family struggled with conflicting dreams about how to use a life insurance payout while facing housing discrimination and systemic racism that threatened to defer their dreams for a better life.

In the play, Hansberry showed Walter Lee Younger’s business dreams hitting systemic barriers, Beneatha Younger’s dreams of become a doctor facing discrimination, and Mama Younger holding the insurance check—their one shot at something better.

In a substantial way, Hughes’ poem and Hansberry’s play, can be understood as diagnosing a national contradiction. In 1776, our nation’s founders declared a revolutionary dream: ‘We hold these truths to be **self-evident**, that all men are created equal, that they are **endowed** by their Creator with certain **unalienable** Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. Rights that one has simply by being human.

Those words planted seeds of divine truth **about** human dignity. Yet for generations that dream remained systematically deferred for millions of **Americans**. The Declaration promised equality while slavery **persisted**. It proclaimed liberty while denying basic rights, endowed by our Creator, to women, to Indigenous peoples, to descendants of enslaved persons, and countless others. The gap between promise and reality created what Dr. King would later call ‘the fierce urgency of now.’

Here’s what’s remarkable: rather than abandoning that deferred dream each generation of **faithful people** chose to water that dream with **hope**, tend it with prayer, **AND** nurture it with **persistent resistant action**. They believed that God’s vision of human dignity, embedded in those **founding words**, was worth the long struggle toward fulfillment.

I see deferred dreams in the faces of many in our community today - the immigrant, the working poor, with dreams of a home and food, and seniors living with the threat of losing the financial support they have earned.

So, what happens when dreams are deferred? How do we keep going?

## A DIFFERENT KIND OF HOPE

This is where our Scripture readings today offer something revolutionary—a different kind of hope. Not the fragile hope that withers when a dream is deferred, or the deferred hope that makes the heart sick (as suggested in Proverbs 13:12) but an enduring hope anchored in God's character and promises.

In our scripture reading, Tabitha a follower of Jesus. A woman who used thread and fabric as her ministry to clothe the vulnerable. But then—she got sick and died. Whatever her noble dream, it now lies still in an upstairs room.

The widows refused to treat her dream as dried up.

They sent for Peter. And Peter, with resurrection power, went to Tabitha's bedside, knelt, prayed, and spoke to a body, Tabitha get up." And she did.

This is what a deferred dream looks like—it's grief and confusion. But it's also hope and faithful action. Let me show you how this kind of hope works in our lives.

### **Hope Redeems Dreams**

When specific dreams are deferred, hope provides the framework for seeing them in a larger context.

When your specific dreams seem to be drying up like raisins in the sun, remember that the God who raised Tabitha from the dead can redeem your deferred dreams within God's larger purposes. Even though we don't all like them, raisins do have sweetness.

This redemption isn't just a future promise - it's happening right now. When we shift our perspective, we may discover peace in the present moment. Rather than worrying, fretting, crying, complaining, or ruminating 'Why hasn't my dream come true?' try gratitude and curiosity instead - 'How is God using this waiting to prepare me for greater?'

### **Hope Transforms Dreams**

Biblical hope transforms our focus from merely personal aspirations to God's larger purposes.

When Israel was under Roman occupation, they dreamed of political liberation. Jesus transformed that dream to eternal relationship, essentially saying "*What you think you want isn't nearly as good as what I have in store for you.*"

Sometimes God doesn't give us exactly what we dreamed of—God gives us something better by transforming our dreams themselves.

### **Hope Completes Dreams**

Hope doesn't just help us survive the wait—it completes what God started. This means both sustaining us through the journey AND bringing our dreams to their intended destination.

## Hope Sustains Us Through Opposition

When opposition comes, biblical hope doesn't just help us endure; it actively sustains our dreams through the darkest valleys. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

The ones who are oppressed and marginalized find strength and courage to prepare for the day that their dreams come true. When the wait is over and their deferred dream comes true, we won't have to get ready. We will **BE** ready for God's greater.

## Hope Fulfills Dreams in God's Way

Often, hope completes our dreams in ways we could never have imagined.

I think of Malala (Yousafzai) You-chef-zi, whose simple dream of going to school seemed to die with a Taliban bullet when she was just 15 years old. What God gave Malala was a global classroom where she could teach the world about the power of education. Her deferred dream of being a student was transformed into becoming a teacher for millions. And at just 17 years old, she received that Noble Peace Prize.

God's completion of our deepest hopes often looks different—and better—than what we originally envisioned.

## WHEN DREAMS FOR OTHERS ARE DEFERRED

There's a particular ache that comes with loving someone so deeply that their potential becomes your prayer, their healing your hope, their choices your sleepless nights. These dreams we carry for others are the most beautiful and brutal kind.

The truth is: We can't save the people we love. But we can **carry them in hope** into the hands of a God who never stops working.

## LIVING WITH BIBLICAL HOPE

So, what does this mean for us today, as we face our own deferred dreams?

It means we can hold both realities simultaneously: the pain of deferred dreams **AND** the certainty of ultimate hope. Biblical hope doesn't dismiss our disappointments or tell us our dreams don't matter. Biblical hope places those dreams within God's larger story of redemption.

This changes how we approach our dreams in three practical ways:

1. We hold our specific dreams loosely, while gripping hope, anchored in the promises of God, firmly.

2. We learn to see our personal dreams within God's larger story.
3. We find strength to continue dreaming even after disappointment.

When we feel our dreams drying up, our faith reminds us of God's unchanging character and promises.

## HOPE CHANGES TODAY

Biblical hope promises a better tomorrow AND transforms how we live today. When our hope is anchored in God's character rather than circumstances, we can pursue our dreams with passion without being destroyed by setbacks. We can love people without being controlled by their choices. We can face uncertainty with curiosity rather than fear.

So, when our dream seems deferred—when the job doesn't come through, when the relationship fails, when justice is delayed, when the diagnosis is grim, —remember that God's ultimate promise isn't just that your individual dreams will be fulfilled, although that is important, **but** that a greater dream awaits: a **restoration so complete** that the pain of waiting will be wiped away with your tears.

## Your Call to Hope

Today, I'm asking you to do three things:

1. Acknowledge your deferred dreams honestly before God
2. Anchor your hope in God's character and promises rather than in specific outcomes.
3. Act in faith by continuing to pursue what God has placed on your heart

## How does the story end?

Let me tell you how Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun ends."

The Younger family is in crisis. Most of their insurance money is gone. Then, a representative from the white neighborhood, where they've just bought a house, shows up. He offers to buy the house back—at a premium—if they'll agree **not** to move in.

Walter stands with his young son at his side, facing the man who wants them to stay "**where they belong.**" Everything hangs in the balance—dignity or safety, hope, or fear, standing tall or backing down.

Walter Lee tells the man **We will be moving in.**

This is what biblical hope looks like. Anchored in Christ – even when the path ahead is uncertain.

## CONCLUSION

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There is another option if you are willing to embrace it: **HOPE** happens.

Hope that redeems dreams, hope that transforms dreams, hope that completes dreams.

**The same faith** that inspired the Youngers' courage stands with us. **The same Christ** who raised Tabitha lives inside of each of us. **The same spirit** who can break the shackles that hold us back from our God given endowment to certain unalienable rights empowers us. **The same God** who will one day wipe away every tear from our eyes walks beside us.

**That same persistent hope** is available to each of us if **we are willing**.