

Reel Faith Sermon Series
The Shawshank Redemption – Hope
July 14, 2019 - Romans 5:1-5
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For one of my first classes in seminary, I was asked to write a paper about why I had faith. That's the moment I knew I was going to fail seminary. How do you answer that? Do you have faith in order to get into Heaven? Do you have faith because you believe it makes you a better person? I said the reason I have faith is because it gives me hope, and I would rather live with hope in something and Someone bigger than me than to live as if this world is all there is.

How you do define "hope"? The dictionary says it's "a desire accompanied by expectation of or belief in fulfillment." Feels a bit stodgy, but it gets to the point that hope is the belief in something you want to happen, even without evidence that it will happen. Another dictionary says to hope is "to cherish a desire with anticipation." But the best definition I've ever heard for hope comes from the poet Emily Dickinson, who wrote, "Hope is the thing with feathers/that perches in the soul/and sings a tune without the words/and never stops at all."

Hope is the central theme of our movie for today. As we continue our "Reel Faith" sermon series, we're talking about one of the most beloved, iconic movies of the last few decades, "The Shawshank Redemption." It ranks as #72 on the American Film Institute's all-time movie list and received a 98% audience rating on Rotten Tomatoes. That other 2% probably kick puppies and pinch babies.

"The Shawshank Redemption," based on a Stephen King novella, tells the story of Andy Dufresne, a mild-mannered, cerebral banker who's falsely accused of killing his wife and her lover. He's found guilty and sentenced to serve his time in Shawshank Prison, a hell on earth run by a ruthless warden and violent prison guards. It's a place where a soft-spoken intellectual like Andy doesn't fit, and he's forced to adapt his way of life to survive in his new surroundings without letting the primitive brutality of the prison kill his spirit. As one inmate says, "When they put you in that cell... and those bars slam home... that's when you know it's for real. A whole life blown away in the blink of an eye. Nothing left but all the time in the world to think about it."

During his first few weeks in Shawshank Andy befriends Red, who was sentenced to prison for life as a teenager for murder. Red, played by Morgan Freeman, is now well into middle age and long past his violent days, but a life sentence is a life sentence, so Red is resigned to living out the rest of his days in Shawshank. He's denied parole every time he is up for it, and he's long since lost any reason to have hope for freedom. Red becomes the narrator of the movie.

Red helps Andy learn the rules about life in Shawshank. Red is the guy who can "get things" in the prison, like cigarettes or books, so Andy goes to Red with an odd request: he wants a small rock hammer that he can use to chisel chess figurines out of the rocks he finds in the prison yard. Red gets that for him, along with a poster of Rita Hayworth that Andy hangs on his cell wall. It's in the small things like the hammer and the poster that Andy is able to remain true to himself in spite of his new surroundings.

Once the warden learns of Andy's banking expertise, he starts having Andy do his taxes, directing Andy to illegally shuffle money around so that the warden can steal from the prison without getting caught. Andy tells Red, "I was honest on the outside, it was only in prison that I learned how to become a crook." Andy helps the warden and, as a reward, earns some perks

around the prison, like starting a library to help inmates earn their high school diploma. It's another way Andy shares a sense of hope inside Shawshank

As his time in Shawshank lengthens, Andy maintains this inner sanctuary of hope and makes it his mission to share it with others. In one of the most powerful scenes, Andy sneaks in the warden's office and locks the door. Then, he puts an opera record on the warden's gramophone and plays it over the loudspeaker so all the prisoners can hear. Listen to what Red says when he hears the music: "I have no idea to this day what those two Italian ladies were singing about. Truth is, I don't want to know. Some things are better left unsaid. I'd like to think they were singing about something so beautiful it can't be expressed in words, and it makes your heart ache because of it. I tell you, those voices soared higher and farther than anybody in a grey place dares to dream. It was as if some beautiful bird had flapped into our drab little cage and made these walls dissolve away, and for the briefest of moments, every last man in Shawshank felt free." Hope is a thing with feathers.

But not so for Red. Andy is sentenced to a month in solitary confinement for the opera stunt. When he gets out, Red asks him why he did it, and Andy says he needed to hear the music so he wouldn't forget that there's a reason to have hope for something outside the prison walls. Red, who has been denied parole for years, responds angrily, "Hope. Let me tell you something my friend. Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope will drive a man insane. It's got no use on the inside. You better get used to that idea." Red has been in prison long enough to know that there's no reason to have hope any longer.

I want to remind you of the Romans passage I read earlier, because it's going to come into play when we get to the end of the movie. Paul encourages the Romans to rejoice in their sufferings and gives this peculiar progression. He says, "Suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint." Every time I hear that passage, I think of Andy Dufresne, who suffered unjustly at Shawshank, who endured his time there, who never lost his integrity, and who, in the end, held out hope, even when everything seemed hopeless.

Hope is one of the reasons people make fun of Christians, just as Red cautioned Andy. Many people think that being a Christian gives people a false sense of hope, promising happiness and peace and eternal life, but never really delivering. For me, having faith has never been a promise of happiness, and the peace I experience is often in spite of the turmoil or conflict in my life. God doesn't promise to take away the hard parts of life, but rather to walk with us through them. And as for eternal life...who knows? But I would rather live believing it's true because it gives makes life richer, more meaningful. That's where my hope comes from.

And yet, we know what it's like to feel hopeless. We know what it's like to feel confined by our guilt, our pain, a diagnosis, a rejection letter, a poor decision by a loved one. We've felt the chains of loneliness wrap around our hearts, heard the slamming doors of frustration cutting off our dreams and opportunities. Even with all our blessings, we know what it feels to be hopeless, to wonder if there really is anything bigger than the cruel capriciousness of this life.

Andy felt that acutely, and yet he never stopped dreaming of more. Near the end of the movie, Andy tells Red about a dream he has of getting out of prison and going to Zihuatanejo, Mexico, to open a hotel. Red chastises Andy, telling him, "That's a pipe dream. Mexico is way down there and you're in here." Andy says, "I guess that leaves me one choice. Get busy livin' or get busy dyin'." I'd like to think each of us face that same choice each time we feel we're in a hopeless situation. Do we choose to live with hope?

Andy did, even when he was surrounded 24/7 by four concrete walls. Or was he? One morning, when the guards go to get Andy from his cell, it's empty. He's vanished into thin air. The warden storms in and throws a fit, only to discover that behind the poster on Andy's wall is a tunnel that's been meticulously chiseled with a small rock hammer over the course of 25 years. We learn that on the previous night, Andy crawled through that tunnel and then through 300 yards of sewer pipe to make his escape. In the most iconic image from the movie, Andy emerges from the sewer people into a rainstorm, arms raised to the sky as he tastes his new life for the first time. Seems like I remember another story about guards surrounding a cell that ends up being empty, and the former occupant emerging three days (not three hundred yards) later to new life.

But Andy's story is not over. You remember all that money he was hiding for the warden? Actually, he was putting it in an account he created for himself, which he now retrieves and uses to start a new life on a beach by the crystal blue waters of Mexico. As Red says when he learns of Andy's escape, "Some birds are meant to be caged." Hope is a thing with feathers.

Now, if the movie ended there, it would be a good movie. Maybe a great movie. But what makes it a phenomenal movie is what happens next. While he was still in prison, Andy told Red that if Red ever got out, he was to go to a certain tree in a certain small town and find something buried underneath it. At the time, Red thinks Andy is crazy but he promises, and after Andy escapes, much to his surprise, Red is granted parole and released from prison. He's been institutionalized so long that he's afraid he won't survive on the outside, even contemplating crimes he can commit so that he can be locked up again. The only thing that keeps him from doing it is his promise to Andy.

Under that tree, Red finds \$1000 and a note that reads, "Dear Red. If you're reading this, you've gotten out. And if you've come this far, maybe you're willing to come a little further. You remember the name of the town, don't you? I could use a good man to help me get my project on wheels. I'll keep an eye out for you and the chessboard ready. Remember, Red. Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies. I will be hoping that this letter finds you, and finds you well. Your friend. Andy." Suffering produces endurance, which produces character, which produces hope, and hope does not disappoint.

Red buys a bus ticket and heads to Zihuatanejo. This former murderer, hardened by a life in Shawshank prison, who previously had given up on hope, ends the movie with these words: "I find I am so excited I can barely sit still or hold a thought in my head. I think it is the excitement only a free man can feel, a free man at the start of a long journey whose conclusion is uncertain...I hope I can make it across the border. I hope to see my friend and shake his hand. I hope the Pacific is as blue as it has been in my dreams. I hope." The last scene of the movie is Andy and Red hugging on a beach beside the blue waters of the Pacific Ocean.

There is so much I love about this movie, but what I love most is that it reminds me of the tenacious power of hope. When things are going great, we don't need hope. When we need it is when we feel walled in by our circumstances, or crawling through the sewers of life looking for a light at the end of the tunnel, or desperate for a reminder that God hasn't forgotten us. In those moments, we need to be reminded that Jesus Christ died on the cross so that we will know how much we are loved and how much God is with us.

There's so much I don't know about faith. That might get me fired, because y'all are paying me to know those things. But I don't know them; that's what makes it faith. But I have hope, and hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies. Hope does not disappoint.