

Shawshank Redemption

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

October 17, 2010

6th in the six-part series: *St. Andrew at the Movies*

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Romans 15:1–4, 13 (NRSV)

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. ² Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. ³ For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.” ⁴ For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.

¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

1 Corinthians 15:51–58 (NRSV)

⁵¹ Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

⁵⁵ “Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Hope. Without it we are lost.

How can we remain hopeful even in the most difficult of circumstances?

There are many themes we could explore in the 1994 film, *Shawshank Redemption*. Freedom, peace, endurance, redemption, friendship, and more. But rather than taking a brief look at each, this week we’ll concentrate on one: hope, for I think it is the theme that binds this story together.

The English writer William Hazlitt had this to say about hope:

“Hope is the best possession. None are completely wretched but those who are without hope, and few are reduced so low as that.”

One of those few is an inmate at Shawshank Prison in 1947 by the name of Ellis Boyd “Red” Redding, who is serving a life sentence for murder. Red has been eligible for and been denied parole so many times that he hasn’t just given up hope of ever being free, he has come to see hope as a dangerous commodity, the empty promise that only makes things worse.

And then into Red’s world steps Andy Dufresne, a tall and thin ex-banker convicted of murdering his wife and her lover. Andy seems oddly peaceful, even serene in his prison life. As Red put it, it was like Andy wore “an invisible coat that would shield him from this place.”

The portrayal of Andy brought to mind a passage from Paul’s letter to the Philippians:

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Chapter 4, verses 8-9

Little did we know just how concretely Andy would take Paul's advice to think about things that are pure, pleasing, commendable, and excellent if he wants to find peace.

After some years passed and the friendship between the two men had grown, Andy parlayed his financial expertise into a job as tax advisor to the guards and bookkeeper for the warden. Andy was given the prison library and even finagled a bunch of new books and records out of the state.

What did Andy do with this new status? He locked himself in the warden's office and played a Mozart aria over the prison's PA system. Why? What did it mean? Here's what Red thought of it:

Red: *[narrating]* 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 best left unsaid. I'd like to think they were singing about something so beautiful, it can't be expressed in words, and makes your heart ache because of it. I tell you, those voices soared higher and farther than anybody in a gray place dares to dream. It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our drab little cage and made those walls dissolve away, and for the briefest of moments, every last man in Shawshank felt free.

Perhaps that was it. Creating a moment of freedom, making hope a bit more concrete. I'm guessing that Red would say the apostle Paul got it just right.

Of course, the escapade earned Andy two weeks in the hole, solitary confinement in a completely darkened cell. When he returned to his friends, they wanted to know how he had possibly survived the two weeks. He told them it was the music . . . the music in his head:

Andy Dufresne: That's the beauty of music. They can't get that from you... Haven't you ever felt that way about music?

Red: I played a mean harmonica as a younger man. Lost interest in it though. Didn't make much sense in here.

Andy Dufresne: Here's where it makes the most sense. You need it so you don't forget.

Red: Forget?

Andy Dufresne: Forget that... there are places in this world that aren't made out of stone. That there's something inside... that they can't get to, that they can't touch. That's yours.

Red: What're you talking about?

Andy Dufresne: Hope.

Red: 'Hope!' Let me tell you something, my friend. Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane. It's got no use on the inside.

Hope. Andy is determined to nurture his hope of freedom, to create his own exodus. Red is afraid of it, having learned he supposed, the crushing disappointment of unrealized hope.

But Andy doesn't give up his hope, nor does he give up on Red. After his escape, Andy writes a letter to Red, who has been paroled but is struggling desperately on the outside, afraid every minute of every day:

Andy Dufresne: [*in a letter to Red*] 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?

Red: Zihuatanejo.

Andy Dufresne: 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.

So Red decides to embrace hope and boards a bus headed for Mexico. As he rides along, his thoughts become the closing words of the movie:

Red: [*narrating*] I find I'm so excited, I can barely sit still or hold a thought in my head. I think it's 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.

If there are any who ought to understand the nature and power of hope, it is we Christians. When we talk about hope, true Christian hope, it isn't a matter of probabilities or possibilities. It is the sure knowledge that God's purposes move forward relentlessly, even if we don't always understand why or how and even if we must endure great hardship and loss along the way.

Andy Dufresne went to prison for a crime he didn't commit, but brought hope and even salvation to an old man named Red. I suppose Andy is this film's Christ-figure; many of the really good and lasting movies have one.

We know by virtue of Jesus' faithfulness that even death has lost its sting, for as Jesus was resurrected to newly embodied life after his death, so shall we be resurrected. Our present lives are short, a mere moment in a time. In these lives, regardless of their length, we all experience blessing and tragedy, happiness and deep sorrow. No matter how difficult our circumstances, such difficulties are only temporary.

Earlier this year, I shared a story told by Fleming Rutledge. It is worth one more look:

A story was told me recently that might be apocryphal but might well be true. The two people in question, both clergy, are very well known in the American church. One of them is a prolific writer of skeptical books calling the orthodox faith into question. The other is a famous preacher of the gospel. The skeptic, seeking to provoke the preacher, says, "My daughter has two Ph.D.s. How can I expect her to believe anything so unacceptable to the modern mind as the resurrection of the body?" The preacher says, thoughtfully, "I don't know your daughter. How limited is her imagination?"

Red won't allow himself to imagine or to hope. He won't even play the harmonica Andy gives him, afraid the music will put hope, inevitably disappointing hope, in his heart.

But Christ has liberated us from such fear and challenged our imaginations, to think big, far bigger than many on this earth would like to allow us. We are people of hope, unshakeable and unconquerable hope, because we know that Jesus, innocent of any crime and yet crucified, was raised by God to new life and we trust God's promise to raise us all, to new life, new community, and new love.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes (as paraphrased by Eugene Peterson):

Oh! May the God of green hope fill you up with joy, fill you up with peace, so that your believing lives, filled with the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit, will brim over with hope. (Romans 15:13)

Never give up hope. Never.

The Plot of *Shawshank Redemption*

(adapted from Wikipedia)

In 1947, a banker named Andrew "Andy" Dufresne is convicted of murdering his wife and her lover, based on strong circumstantial evidence. He is sentenced to two consecutive life sentences at Shawshank State Penitentiary in Maine, run by Warden Samuel Norton. Andy is quickly befriended by Ellis Boyd "Red" Redding, a fellow inmate serving a life sentence who has recently failed to gain parole. Andy finds Red has connections on the outside who can acquire contraband for the inmates. He first asks Red for a rock hammer, explaining that he wants to use it to maintain his rock collection hobby, which he uses to fashion a home-made chess set. He later asks Red for a full-size poster of Rita Hayworth for his wall.

While doing manual labor, Andy overhears Captain of the Guards Byron complain about having to pay taxes on a forthcoming inheritance. After explaining to Hadley how to circumvent the taxes legally, Andy's financial advice is soon sought by other guards at Shawshank and nearby prisons. Because of this, Andy is given a space in the library to work on their financial matters. Andy uses his goodwill with the guards to expand the prison library. When one donation to the library provides him with the opera *The Marriage of Figaro*, he plays it over the public address system for all the inmates to hear, well-aware of the punishment of solitary confinement he will receive for the brief moment of bliss.

Warden Norton eventually creates a scheme to use prison labor for public works, undercutting the cost of skilled labor and receiving kickbacks for it. Norton has Andy launder the money under the false identity of Randall Stevens, in exchange for allowing Andy to keep his private cell and to continue maintaining the library.

In 1965, we learn that Andy was innocent of murder, but the warden, anxious to retain Andy's services, destroys any chance that knowledge of Andy's innocence will lead to his release and makes Andy stay in solitary confinement for two months.

Shortly after he returns to his regular cell block, Andy tells Red of his dream of living in Zihuatanejo, a Mexican-Pacific coastal town, and instructs Red, should he ever be freed, to visit a specific hayfield to find something Andy had left there. The next day at roll call, Andy's cell is found empty. Norton, in anger, throws one of Andy's rocks at the poster of Raquel Welch; to everyone's astonishment, the rock tears through the poster, revealing a tunnel that Andy had dug with the rock hammer over the last two decades. At the same time that Norton discovered Andy's escape, Andy used the identity of Randall Stevens to withdraw most of Norton's money from several banks, then sent evidence of Norton's corruption to a local newspaper. On the day the story runs, the police converge on the prison; Hadley is arrested while Norton commits suicide.

When Red finally receives parole after serving 40 years, he decides to follow Andy's advice and visits the hayfield specified by Andy. There, he finds a cache of money and a note left by Andy, reminding him of Zihuatanejo. Red violates his parole and travels to Mexico to be make a new life with Andy.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Rev. Edlen Cowley has developed the following questions as discussion starters for St. Andrew's Fall Fellowship Groups:

Read **John 20:11-18**.

1. What hopeful message do you find there?
2. What does it mean for us to be "Easter people" – people of the resurrection?
3. How does the "never give up" spirit of the lead character, Andy Dufresne, inspire you?
4. How does the friendship of Ellis "Red" Redding and Andy impact you?
5. How did the "caged bird mentality" of Brooks Hatlen affect you?
6. Are you a person of hope?
7. How are you "getting busy living"? How are you modeling this type of forward living for your children or for young people who may be watching you?

Where in your life could your hope have died this past year? Did it? Why or why not?

Both Christ and Andy have "resurrection" experiences. Have you ever had a resurrection experience in your life (a time you came back from a debilitating situation)? No matter how big or small it may be, share it with your group now. How did coming back make you feel?

From your experience, what word of inspiration would you share with someone who was turning to you for inspiration as they were preparing to give up?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Philippians 3:12-21 Paul stays focused on where this life is leading, namely, to Jesus.</p>	<p>Tuesday, John 4:13-18 Jesus as the bringer of freedom from the slavery of sin.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Revelation 21:1-4 Very imaginative portraits of this world put right by God, as we know it will be.</p>	<p>Thursday, Philippians 4:10-14 Andy endured much for a very long time. Paul also learned what it is like to have plenty and to have a little.</p>
<p>Friday, John 8:31-47 Jesus as the bringer of freedom, genuine freedom.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

