

November 5, 2023

All Saints' Sunday

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1 John 3:3



“All who have this hope in [Christ] purify themselves, just as he is pure.” (1 John 3:3)

I think it’s safe to say that, put bluntly, the 1990s was one heck of a decade for Hollywood. From mobster classics like *Goodfellas* to animated blockbusters like *The Lion King*, dozens of great movies made their premiere between 1990 and 2000. Among all of these terrific films, one which is consistently rated as among the decade’s best is *The Shawshank Redemption*. How many have seen *Shawshank*? If you didn’t view it during its initial theater release, you’ve probably caught at least snippets during its seemingly incessant runs on cable networks like USA and TNT.

Shawshank is quite a movie: not only is it one of the very few (perhaps the only) Stephen King creation which I can quote at length in a sermon, but it also is remarkably relevant to our epistle reading from 1 John on hope: “All who have this hope in [Christ] purify themselves, just as he is pure,” we read in 1 John 3:3. What is “hope?” How does hope “purify?” And what does hope have to do with our Gospel passage this morning, Jesus’ famous list of Beatitudes from his Sermon on the Mount?

I want to invite us to explore these questions together this morning, using Stephen King’s *Shawshank* as a lens into the life and power of hope.

To summarize the film briefly, *Shawshank* traces the friendship that develops throughout the 1950s and ‘60s between two inmates in a rural Maine prison. Andy (played by Tim Robbins) and Red (played by Morgan Freeman) are both serving life sentences, though only one of them (Red) is actually guilty. In his pre-carceral life, Andy worked as a successful banker until being falsely convicted for the murder of his wife. Dazed and confused by his sudden arrival in the maximum security compound of Shawshank, Andy wanders around the prison yard alone, vulnerable to attack, and clearly struggling to come to grips with his new reality... until Red, a Shawshank veteran with twenty years of prison life already behind him, decides to take Andy under his wing. Red has hard-won knowledge about surviving prison that Andy needs if he hopes to stay alive, and Red begins to share his prison smarts with Andy, teaching him crucial lessons about how to avoid beatings from the guards and assault from other inmates, how to secretly obtain small, pleasurable distractions like a harmonica—technically contraband according to the prison’s iron rules—but necessary for relieving one’s mind, however briefly, from the horrors of prison life. In short, Red teaches Andy how to stay alive, both physically and psychologically, amidst the oppressive conditions of Shawshank.

But one day, sitting together with some fellow inmates at lunch, Andy makes a remark that deeply disturbs and angers Red. Andy has just been released from two weeks of solitary confinement, punishment for illicitly seizing control of the prison's PA system and using that power to broadcast a Mozart aria throughout the entire prison complex for all of Shawshank's inmates to hear. Andy comes to the lunch table right after his two-week term in solitary ends, and his prison friends, along with Red, ask him how he made it through the past two weeks.

"Easiest time I ever did," replies Andy. The others are incredulous: "No such thing as easy time in the hole," answers one. "A week in the hole is like a year."

"Oh but I had Mr. Mozart to keep me company," says Andy. The others stare back at him confused, like he suddenly started speaking a foreign language. Trying to make sense of his meaning, one says, "You mean, they let you take the record player into the hole?"

"No," Andy replies, "you don't get it: Mozart is in here [pointing to his head] and here [indicating his heart]. That's the beauty of music; they can't get that from you." An awkward silence ripples down the lunch table, and a grimace contorts Red's face. Trying to make sense of his companions' cold response, Andy asks: "Haven't you ever felt that way about music?" Red responds that he used to play the harmonica when he was younger, but he gave it up years ago because, in his words, "it didn't make much sense in Shawshank."

Andy blurts out: "But here's where it makes the most sense! You need it so you don't forget."

"Forget?" echoes Red.

"Yes," says Andy, "[So you don't 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, now clearly agitated, replies: "What're you talking about?"

"Hope," says Andy.

"Hope?" repeats Red in a dead-serious tone. Pointing his spoon at Andy, Red continues: "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. You better get used to that idea." Red then drops his silverware with a clatter and abruptly leaves the table.

I won't spoil the movie's ending for you in case you haven't seen it, but the rest of the film is essentially an exploration of these two basic views of life—cold, emotionally shut-down survival versus keeping open a window in one's heart for hope, even and perhaps especially when maintaining that soft place of hope seems foolish,

naïve, dangerous, deadly.

We know this temptation to hopelessness all too well. In a world of constant war, warming temperatures, political breakdown, and entrenched social injustice, Red's logic of mere survival is a very attractive option. A pervasive cynicism, overwhelming despondence, and in a word "hopelessness" can easily worm its way into our hearts, infecting us before we really even realize what is happening.

And it's at this point—a depth of hopelessness that I venture to guess many of us may be familiar with after years of Covid, climate change, and everything else—it's at this point that we really need to hear the perspective of 1 John and Stephen King. Given how different they are in just about every other area, if Stephen King and 1 John agree on anything, we'd do well to prick up our ears and heed this remarkably rare confluence, especially on a topic as important as hope.

"All who have this hope in [Christ] purify themselves, just as he is pure," reads the end of our passage this morning from 1 John. Hope that "purifies": now that is kind of an odd thing to say. We might well associate hope with lightening our spirits or bringing joy to our hearts, but hope which purifies—what could that possibly mean? How does hope purify? What does hope purify us from? This is exactly the point I believe Stephen King illustrates through the lunchtime conflict between Andy and Red.

"Don't bring hope-giving things like music in here," Red essentially says. "Toying with hope in a hopeless place like Shawshank will just leave you worse off, more fettered, more oppressed, more vulnerable, more tortured, perhaps even to the point of insanity."

"No," says Andy. "Find ways to maintain your hope, because with hope you can always be free even when you're a prisoner, even when you're in solitary confinement, even when external circumstances are as bad as they possibly can be." Over the rest of the movie, Andy's position gradually emerges as the one worth staking one's life on because of how his hope purifies him from buying into Shawshank's low expectations of mere survival. Though Andy respects Red and is grateful for Red's very practical assistance and survival skills, hope enables Andy to reject Red's limited, prison-bound vision of what life is all about. Life is not about mere survival, Andy effectively says. Survival of the fittest is the logic Shawshank wants you to buy into. But we were made for so much more: not merely to grind out our days looking out for Number 1—me—according to the prison logic of limited resources and self-serving violence; we were made, says Andy and 1 John, for much, much more, in fact for nothing less than experiencing the Divine—whether through the person of

Christ according to 1 John or through encounters with transcendent

Beauty, as Andy experiences in the Mozart aria. But to actually live in this fuller and deeper way, this depth of life that our lives have always been meant for, we have to purify ourselves of those lower, baser, selfish, survival-instinct, prison-logic limitations. And that purifying power comes by cultivating hope.

And doing so, committing ourselves to a hope-filled lifestyle rather than a survival-mentality one, not only enables lives of joy, beauty, and transcendence, but also enables the kind of lifestyle Jesus describes in this morning's Gospel reading from Matthew 5. With an ultimate hope in the love of Christ and the power of God, we are set free from living exclusively, or at least primarily, for our own interests in order to live according to a totally otherworldly logic, a logic so foreign to the survivalist logic of Shawshank, the logic of God's upside-down Kingdom where the poor in spirit, the meek, and the peacemakers are blessed. The logic where might does not make right, and where you and I are set free from having to live as if everything depends on us looking out for ourselves. In God's Kingdom, we humans are finally released from the soul-crushing prison logic of this world in order to live lives of radical generosity and crazy love, putting the needs of others before our own, all the while delighting in the Beauty of God all around us—whether in Mozart, or in relationships of true love, or experiences of profound compassion, acceptance, or forgiveness.

And why, how can we live in such freedom? Because of the hope that purifies, the hope in the way of Christ, the hope moreover in the presence of Christ—Immanuel, God with us—who accompanies us, inviting us, showing us both through the stories of Scripture and the quiet whisper in our hearts how to live in Christ's better way: how to reject the logic of Shawshank and enjoy the lives we were made for, lives marked by the freedom of self-sacrifice, the joy of transcendent Beauty, and the otherworldly power of everlasting hope.

Now, you might say, get practical: how practically can we actually build our hope and let hope purify us from all that seeks to bring us down, especially when two minutes of the nightly news throws us into a tailspin of fear and gloom. I think Stephen King is absolutely right to point to Mozart: literally trapped in a context of violence and every imaginable form of abuse, the prisoners of Shawshank have every reason not to hope, and as Red expresses to Andy, to view hope with suspicion as a "dangerous thing," a risk that is naïve, foolhardy, and possibly even deadly amidst Shawshank's harshly real-world conditions. And then Andy shows up, and fully

cognizant of the punishment he will bear, blasts Mozart across the prison yard: there is always room for Beauty, Stephen King seems to say: even when conditions are at their worst, find something Beautiful—whether a song or a flower or a relationship or a hobby—find Beauty, cultivate Beauty, don't let your gaze be pushed down by the terrible conditions immediately confronting us in our world, identify someone or something Beautiful and make time and space to delight in them. Or, even more actively, following Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5, do something Beautiful: show mercy to those on the margins, advance the cause of peace in your family, your home, your community, stand up for righteousness by protecting the Earth.

In any of these, or a thousand other, ways, engage Beauty, because through that Beauty you will access a Reality beyond the prison walls—outside the oppressive limits of this world: you will enter the boundless realm of the Divine, and then you will always be free. Amen.

