

The Shawshank Redemption

God at the Movies 2021...Pt. 6

[Shawshank Trailer 1:50]

I have seen 63 of the top 100 Greatest American films of all time as ranked by the American Film Institute. I had never seen number 23 on the list, *It's a Wonderful Life*, until the week before I preached a sermon on it for our God at the Movies Christmas Edition series in 2013. And until this Monday night I had not seen the 72nd ranked film – our movie selection for today – *The Shawshank Redemption*.

I'm not sure which of those omissions offended people more! "I can't believe you haven't seen..." is a common refrain for both. Even when I tweeted Monday night that I was finally sitting down to watch Shawshank, the responses were incredulous. Because I love movies so much – and see so many movies (it's one of my hobbies) – they simply can't *believe* I've never seen Shawshank. Honestly, the disbelief often comes with an accusatory tone. Like I had intentionally avoided it out of some misguided spite.

But I figured out what happened, so let me just get this out of the way at the start. *The Shawshank Redemption* was released at the end of 1994. I was in my senior year at UT. I worked at the State Capital and we were preparing for the upcoming House

legislative session in January – a very busy season for me. I was also planning a wedding for two weeks after my graduation – well let's be honest, *Deanna* was planning a wedding and I was listening to her read from the bridal magazines.

But due to the religious nature of the family she grew up in, she was not allowed to go see movies in a theatre. Which meant we never saw movies when we were dating, and I wanted to spend what little free time I had with my fiancé, so I didn't see many movies *at all* in late 1994, early 1995. And then after we were married and had moved to Springfield, we didn't have a television for the first year of our marriage. That wasn't a religious choice, it was a *poverty* choice! So we didn't Blockbuster it when Shawshank first hit the VHS world. And then for whatever reason, I just never took the time to sit down and catch it on television. So that's how I missed out on Shawshank until this week.

But to be fair, a whole *lot* of people didn't see *The Shawshank Redemption* when it first hit theaters. It was a box office dud – made for \$25 million and only bringing in \$700k in its opening weekend. It only broke even after it received a Best Picture nomination and got an additional release the following year. It was nominated for 7 Oscars and didn't win a single one; losing the big one to *Forrest Gump* that year.

Despite the film's box-office failure, Warner Brothers shipped 320,000 rental copies to U.S. video stores, a figure a spokesman freely admitted was "out of whack" with the film's performance in theaters. As a result, the film became the most rented video of 1995, and one of the highest-grossing video rentals of all time. Which I suppose is rather poetic for a film that at it's core is about unlikely second chances.

I mentioned Shawshank is the 72nd ranked American film in history. Well, it sits five spots *ahead* of it's 1994 rival, *Forrest Gump*. And in the IMDB fan poll of all-time favorite films it is – and has consistently been – the number one ranked film. Number two, by the way, is fellow God at the Movies selection, *The Godfather*. And that holds up even in our congregation. We had something of a “you pick it, I preach it” competition this year, where the congregation determined what the final film in the series would be. And when the final smoke cleared, *The Shawshank Redemption* was the clear winner over runner-up, *Forrest Gump*.

And therefore, I sat down on Monday night to watch a movie and see if I could make a sermon out of it. Well, there was no “see” about it. I had to come up with a way to make this into a sermon no matter what! I've never done that before. And I can assure you, it's not how my process of 18 years works *at all*. It's something of an arranged marriage. The commitment came first and the love is just expected to follow. But...let's check our Western bias; arranged

marriages have worked throughout history and some of you come from cultures where they still work today. And so, I too was able to find something to love in this prison movie you sentenced me to!

Andy Dufresne is a banker wrongly convicted in 1947 of murdering his cheating wife and her lover. While serving consecutive life-sentences in the notoriously harsh Shawshank Prison, he is befriended by Red, a man “who knows how to get things.” Kind of the prison black market Amazon service. It is Red who narrates the film. Which was a career changer for actor, Morgan Freeman, who has gone on to be rather known for his narration work. This is actually the second movie he's narrated that we've used for God at the Movies. Do you remember the 2005 Oscar winning documentary, *March of the Penguins*?

Well, when he first sees him arrive through the gates, Red bets that Andy will be one of the first to break under the soul-stealing prison conditions. But the quiet bookish banker is made of sterner stuff than any of the older inmates could have guessed. At first Andy is indeed subjected to garish abuse at the hands prisoners, but through it all he fights to maintain his dignity and, above all, his hope. As Red observes “He strolled, like a man in a park without a care or a worry in the world, like he had on an invisible coat that would shield him from this place.”

And Andy made sacrifices to bring others under his shield. While conscripted to spread tar on a prison roof, Andy literally puts his life on the line by interrupting a guard's conversation to offer him tax advice. He bargains that he can save the guard a great deal of money and all he would ask in return is three cold beers apiece for his "co-workers". The gamble pays off and the men experience a brief window of normalcy at the end of their day.

And that begins something of a cottage industry of financial services offered by the incarcerated money wiz to wardens and guards. And in exchange, Andy gets some preferential treatment – he doesn't have to share a cell, the abusive treatment stops, and he is transferred from the prison laundromat to a more white-collar job as the prison librarian. And even then he uses his position to help the others, writing a letter a week to the State Legislature – for six years! – until they eventually agree to send funding for proper books. Which he uses to help many of the prisoners complete their high school equivalency exams.

Among the initial library treasures is an old phonograph and a stack of classical records. And in a pleasant synchronicity with last week's film, Andy is delighted to discover one record in particular; *The Marriage of Figaro* by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

One day while cleaning the office, Andy is able to lock a guard in the bathroom and plays the record over the public announcement system for all the prison to hear. It's a touching moment. Take a look...[**Mozart 2:02**]

"It was like the music melted the bars of our cage and every last man felt free." But of course, not really. It was just an illusion. It's the paradox of music. On the one hand, it makes us feel free. But on the other, it's hard to sing in prison, isn't it? This made me think of the 137th Psalm. This is what's called a Psalm of exile – we talked about the period of Israel's exile in the *Wizard of Oz* sermon, about the great feeling of existential homelessness.

You recall that Israel was conquered by the Babylonians, Jerusalem – also called Zion – was destroyed, and her people carried off into 70 years of captivity in a distant land. That's the setting of this song of lament. So **Psalms 137:1-3**, "*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"*" It's bad enough to be captives, to be forcefully kept from home and freedom, but then to face the taunts of the guards is further torment. It's a mocking, "dance monkey, dance" cruelty.

And you see it in the response of the captive exiles, V.4 “*How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?*” How indeed? And yet...we know they *did* sing. There are other exilic Psalms, there are the Lamentations. And their songs led to countless other songs. The plight of the Hebrew slaves – both in Babylon and in Egypt – has always been used as a metaphor for the experience of slaves all over the world - including in America. And all of this linkage between imprisonments and the power of music to lift the soul, of course made me think of the tradition of African-American Spirituals.

Now, Shawshank the film is blissfully free of ideas of race. Red is of course black, but that fact doesn't seem to set him apart in any way in the movie – which we know is not true of the actual American penal system, now or certainly in the 1950's. In fact, in the book, Red is a white, ginger haired Irish-American. They have some fun with this in the movie when Andy asks why they call him Red and he responds with a wink, “I guess because I'm Irish”.

Besides, I spent some time this summer in Maine where this story is set and it is in fact the whitest state in America. So yes, if you set this story in an Alabama prison, the music would likely be more gospel than classical. And yet, I think there are definite ties between the power of music and any displaced persons.

The Bible frequently – from the Old Testament Prophets to the Sermon on the Mount - lumps together people from divergent family structures, divergent economic structures, divergent ethic structures, along with prisoners, as people who need to be shown extra grace and compassion. They all tend to get overlooked – and even abused – by traditional society.

And so music is a common balm of the disinherited. W.E.B. DuBois in his famous book *The Souls of Black Folk*, was one of the first to write a significant interpretation of the power of what he called “Sorrow Songs” to breath sighs of hope into desperate places. Decades later, Howard Thurman – a key mentor to MLK in the Civil Rights movement – gave a lecture at both Harvard and Howard Universities entitled “Religious Ideas in Negro Spirituals.”

He introduced it by stating, “They will not be discussed from the point of view of music or poetry, but rather as inspired expressions of religious interpretation found on the lips of a people who were far removed from a familiar environment and from that emotional security common to those who live out their days in the midst of their fathers. It must never be forgotten that the slave was a man without a home. He had been snatched from his “familiar place” and, under the most cruel and inhuman conditions, transported thousands of miles away into a new world.” (Thurman, 515)

Like a slave, a prisoner is “a man without a home” – far removed from familiar environments and the emotional security of family. That’s an equally descriptive picture of the men of Shawshank prison. Slaves, exiles and prisoners: music brings hope to people in desperate circumstances. We see this with Andy. For his stunt with the record player he was given two week “in the hole” – solitary confinement – enough to make most men go mad. But Andy emerged with a smile on his face. He explains why in this clip as he first returns to his friends. **[Hope 1:42]**

Is hope a good thing or a bad thing? Andy identifies music with hope – as does the Bible. But Red is not entirely wrong either. There *is* a negative side to hope. He sees it as dangerous. Like the exiles of Psalm 137 he too has hung up his harp. In fact, later Andy gets Red as harmonica as a present, but the dejected prisoner is unable to bring himself to play. How can we sing the songs of the Lord...while in Shawshank?

There are plenty of people who see hope as dangerous. Isn’t that what we are saying when we warn people to “not get your hopes up”? Deanna and I attended the Longhorn football game against Kansas last week. It was probably the worst defeat in UT history – certainly the most painful *I’ve* ever witnessed.

We made the worst team in the league look like Alabama coming out of the gate. But that wasn’t what made it so painful. Over and over the Horns kept pulling back in it...only to find some new way to break our fan hearts. As we went into overtime we even sang “Don’t Stop Believing” – and really meant it! And then the Jayhawks stuck a 2-point conversation knife “deep in the heart of Texas.” It was the hope that was so cruel.

Sports columnist, Cedric Golden, prognosticated on the remaining two games in the *Statesman* on Tuesday, “To expect [the Longhorns] to win at West Virginia on Saturday and at home against Kansas State in the regular season finale **feels more like hope than anything else.**” He’s using “hope” the way Red does! It’s not a positive trait. It’s wishful thinking. It’s a pipe dream. It’s irrational. Hope can drive a man insane. It’s got no use on the inside of a prison.

Even the Bible gives a word of caution, **Proverbs 13:12**, “*Hope deferred makes the heart sick...*” it’s quite literally heart breaking...“*but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.*” The tree of life! That’s very important Biblical terminology from both the very beginning and the very ending of the scriptural account of human history. The tree of life appears in Eden and Heaven – we had it and we’ll have it again.

Look, love is dangerous. Love is risky. Many of you know the pains associated with the broken promises of love. But you can't live without love. Well, you can't live free. Same thing with hope. Human beings are *absolutely* hope-shaped creatures. The way you live now is completely controlled by what you believe about your future. Do you understand that?

The way you live now is completely controlled by what you believe about your future. Let me give you a real-life prison illustration. I once read about two men in a 3rd world dictatorship – political dissidents – who were sentenced to 10 years of hard labor. But just before they went into that gulag, one of the men discovered his wife and child had been killed in the raid in which he was captured. The other man was told that his wife and child were alive and waiting for him. You know what happened. After just a couple of years, the first man wasted away, curled up, and died. The other man *endured* and *resisted* and stayed *strong* and walked out a free man 10 years later.

You say that's not surprising. No, it's not! But think about it. *Same* circumstances, same people, same situation, and yet they *experienced* their "now" in two completely different ways because of what they believed about their future. Your present is controlled by what you believe about your future.

And Christians believe that our hope will not be deferred forever. That one day we will have Eden restored. We will sit under the tree of life. And music helps us remember that. Even for just a moment. Again, Howard Thurman, "The other-worldly hope looms large, and this is not strange. The other-worldly hope is always available when groups of people find themselves completely frustrated in the present. When all hope for release in this world seems unrealistic and groundless the heart turns to a way of escape beyond the present order." (Thurman, 525)

"Release", "escape", no wonder these are the themes of a prisoner. But of course, it's a metaphor for all of us. Hope seems unrealistic, but that's what makes it hope. Again, the Bible shoots straight about this. Look at **Romans 8:24-25**, "*For in this hope we were saved. **But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.***"

The very nature of hope is you can't see it. You don't have it yet. It takes patience. Do you realize that there will be no hope in heaven? Heaven is a hopeless place! How do you like *that*? But think about it, you don't need hope in heaven, you have certainty. It's the difference between, "Boy I sure hope I get paid this week." vs. having a paycheck in your hand.

Is hope risky? Sure, but what's the alternative? Walk out on the job before payday? Quit rooting for your football team? Let your mind and heart succumb to the prison bars as well as your body? That's something that Andy just can't do. And so as Romans advises, he's patient. Very patient. In fact, he's been in prison for nearly 20 years when he confides in Red his plans for freedom. He talks about this little Mexican fishing village on the Pacific coast – Zihuatanejo – where he plans to buy a small hotel, renovate an old boat and just spend the rest of his days in a warm place with no memory. It's a vision of paradise that gives him hope inside the prison walls.

But remember, for Red, hope is a dangerous thing. So he warns his friend, “I don't think you ought to be doing this to yourself, Andy. This is just shitty pipe-dreams. I mean, Mexico is way the hell down there and you're in here, and that's the way it is.” And that *is* the way it is. Remember, by definition, hope is unseen.

Now, if you are offended by the use of language in that quote – “Why would he say that in *church*?” – well, unclutch your pearls, it's not unnecessary vulgarity. I have a rationale for sharing it like that. It's actually kind of brilliant writing. Because unknown to any of us – including Red – “a shitty pipe-dream” is *exactly* what Andy is counting on!

You see for decades, Andy has spent every night slowly, *slowly* scraping away a portion of soft stone in his cell wall to dig a hole – a hole just large enough for his skinny frame, and just small enough to be covered by the pinup-posters of movie starlets that rotate across his sentence. In fact, the full name of the Stephen King short-story on which the movie is based is “Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption”.

So one stormy night, Andy makes his break, entering the hole, shimmying down a crevice between the walls and squeezing into a *sewage* pipe through which he crawls 500 yards – that's five football fields of filth– to a grate on the outside of the prison. A “shitty pipe-dream” indeed! And try as they might, no one ever manages to locate Andy Dufresne. But weeks later, Red receives an unsigned postcard from a Texas border town and surmises that his friend made it to his paradise.

So Andy's clinging to hope proves fruitful. But what of Red? As it happens, shortly after the breakout, *his* parole is finally granted and he too finds himself a free man. A “Morgan Free-man”! Dad! But has his lack of hope left him a broken man? Earlier in the film we saw an elderly prisoner named Brooks released after a long sentence and – having become “institutionalized” – he is unable to adapt to life outside of the prison walls, eventually hanging himself in the room of his half-way house.

Conveniently, Red is assigned the same bedroom and job on the outside as Brooks had been. Would he succumb to a similar fate? Or would he finally take a chance on hope? Well, in their previous conversation about the dream of a Mexican paradise, Andy told Red that if he ever did get out, there was a special rock placed in a wall by a large tree on a farm on the outskirts of a small Maine town. And that there was something under the rock that he wanted Red to have.

So despite his fears, a sense of loyalty to his friend leads Red out into the countryside where he does in fact discover the unique rock, finding a tin box underneath containing an envelope with 20 new \$50 dollar bills and a letter. A letter addressed to Red from Andy. He says that “if you’re reading this, you’ve made it out. And if you made it this far, maybe you’d be willing to come a little further. Do you remember the name of the village? I could use a good man to help me down there.”

And the letter concludes, “Remember that hope is a good thing, Red, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies. I will be hoping that this letter finds you, and finds you well.” There’s our hope theme again. A hope that never dies. “For in this hope we were saved.” Red is at a crossroads. Will he dare at last to risk hope? I want to play you the final scene – well, *mostly* – and listen close for our key word. **[End Scene :34]**

The final words we hear...“I hope.” Good for you, Red! Good for you. And then the credits roll. *Well...*at least that’s how the book ends the story. Stephen King leaves it on an ambiguous note. But of course, Hollywood studios wouldn’t go for that. No, no, that just won’t do. We need the payoff. Audiences will demand to see the reunion of the two friends. And so we get it. But I’m not Hollywood, so I’m not going to show it to you! I’ll end it the way Stephen King wanted it! Because “hope that is seen is no hope at all.”

So that’s the story; how about you? In the tough seasons of life – and let’s face it, there’s been more than our share of tough seasons recently – but do you see hope as a gift? Or as a dangerous thing? How do you view the upcoming...job interview, date, financial opportunity, doctors visit, challenge for one of your kids? Are you the kind of person who is just sure it’s going to be a disaster – tell’s everyone who asks, “I know it’s going to be a disaster.” – so that it won’t hurt so bad if things don’t work out? Because let’s face it, things often *don’t* work out in this life, do they?

And that might be an ok strategy for a football fan – listen, I still have not bought in on these Dallas Cowboys! People talking about “Super Bowl”. Let me tell you something, friend, hope is a dangerous thing! But that’s a game. That’s no way to build a marriage. That’s no way to raise a family. To go through a career. To go through a life.

Remember, the way you live now is completely controlled by what you believe about your future. And what Christians believe about the future is summarized at the end of the Nicene Creed. Words that have been recited by Christians of all stripes and languages for thousands of years. “We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.” Well amen.

Now, when you make that confession, there are people that will accuse you of being unrealistic. That Christian hope is just a pipe-dream. Or worse, the opiate of the masses. Just a fairy-tale to keep you from rioting while the warden makes a living off your labor. That’s not new. They accused those Christian slaves of the same thing when they sang their songs of hope and freedom in the cotton fields.

Again, Howard Thurman heard all that: Again and again I have heard many people speak despairingly of the otherworldly emphasis as purely a mechanism to escape and sheer retreat. But the facts have made it clear that this faith, this sung faith, served to deepen the capacity

of endurance and the ability to absorb their suffering...It taught a people how to ride high to life, how to look squarely in the face those facts that argue most dramatically against all hope, and to use those facts as a raw material out of which they fashioned a hope that their environment, with all its cruelty, could not crush...This total experience enabled them to reject annihilation and to affirm a terrible right to live.”

Do you hear what he is saying? He says the slaves, because they knew about the new heavens and new earth, because they knew about judgment day, because they knew eventually all their desires would be fulfilled and nobody was going to get away with anything, and all wrong-doing would be put down, and the chains would be loosed and the prison doors opened, because they believed in that...see they lived in an environment that was *horribly* cruel. And in that environment, all the facts pointed to hopeless despair.

But they said, “No, that hope of the Kingdom come is mine, one day I will belong to that.” And as a result, Howard Thurman says, it enabled them to fashion a hope that their environment, with all its cruelty, could not crush. It was a hope that couldn’t be taken from them no matter how sharp the lash. Why? Because the lash couldn’t *reach* it! Because the music was in here (head) and in here (heart). Hope was *out there*. It was in the future. They had this living hope. And that, Thurman said, “enabled them to reject annihilation and affirm a terrible right to live.”

You know, the difference between a fortress and a prison - both built of solid rock – but whether those stone walls will keep you safe or keep you a prisoner - save your life or take your life. The only difference is...who holds the keys. And the Book of Revelation starts with Jesus Christ himself appearing before John the Apostle and saying, (**Revelation 1:17-18**) “*Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.*”. That’s a hope worth singing about.

Let me tell you a quick story and we’ll be done. True story. By the way, did you realize that this is the 400th anniversary of Thanksgiving? First one was celebrated in November 1621 at Plymouth with the Pilgrims and the Indians. Of course Native American relations went somewhat downhill after the turkey and dressing! In 1663, a war party from the Minnisink tribe swept down from the Catskill Mountains to ransack a small settlement in what is now upstate New York.

Killed several people, took a number of women and children captive. Among them were Catherine DuBois and her infant daughter, Sara. For ten weeks they were held in the mountains while rescue parties searched in vain. Feeling confident they would escape retribution, the Indians decided to give thanks for their success by burning Catherine and Sara alive.

So they arranged a pile of logs inside which the women were staked. Catherine was completely helpless as she watched her captors begin to ignite the torches that would spell her doom.

Not much hope. A lot of us might have begged for mercy or screamed down curses on our tormenters. But instead, Catherine DuBois began to sing. And she sang in French. You see she was a Huguenot – Protestant Christians, many of whom - facing harsh persecution from Catholics in 17th century France – had come to the New World seeking religious freedom. And so that day she filled the woods with the sounds of a French hymn based on the words of the 137th Psalm. Remember? “How can we sing the songs of our Lord in a strange land?”

And her captors, mesmerized by her beautiful voice, stopped their preparations and listened. And then demanded another song...and another...and another. And the legend says that while she sang, her husband and his search party burst upon the scene and rescued her. Now, it could be that her singing intrigued the Minnisink enough to keep her alive and that bought her time to eventually be rescued. That ending does sound a bit Hollywood. But however it happened, history records that she and her daughter were in fact rescued. And that is was the singing that saved her life.

We have a rescuer. Jesus Christ went to the flames in our place. He went down into the eternal Shawshank and took the keys to hell and the grave. And because of the hope – yes hope – that his salvation is not yet complete, but that one day it will be, we too can sing songs of the Lord in this strange land. The rock that once was a prison has become a fortress. As another Psalms says, (**Psalms 62:5-6**) *“Yes, my soul, find rest in God; **my hope comes from him**. Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken.”*

Listen, most of us won't be martyred like the saints of old. We won't be forced into slavery and have our families ripped away from us. Most of us won't ever see the inside of prison bars. But that doesn't mean we don't have troubles. And they are real and they are painful. And they put all of us to the test.

But I'm here to tell you this morning that we have hope. A hope that never dies. And his name is Jesus. So I'm going to invite all of you to stand with me and we're going to close out this morning, close out this God at the Movies series, by singing. I've asked Adrienne and the band to come back and lead us in a great hymn of the church.

And it's so appropriate because it begins with the final word of our film, “**My hope**...is built on nothing less, than Jesus' blood and righteousness.” Let's sing and then I'll lead us in prayer.