

Reflection

Revisiting Redemption by Rev. Sean Parker Dennison

In 1994, when the film “The Shawshank Redemption” was released, I was a young parent of a three-year-old. Given it was based on a short novel by Stephen King, I was wary. I don’t like horror and a short story by King that I had read as a teenager still showed up in my nightmares. So, I put off seeing it until a friend from the UU Fellowship told me that while it didn’t ignore the cruelty of the world, it wasn’t horror. It was a film about hope.

I went to see it the next day and was so moved that I went twice more before the theater moved on to the next big thing. It quickly became my answer to the question, “What’s your favorite film?” And it has stayed at the top of the list for nearly 30 years. It had made me laugh and cry, wrestle with hope and despair, and ask myself some tough questions that I now know were the kind I would come back to again and again. So, when I learned that we’d be “UUs at the movies” for this summer worship cooperative, I immediately thought of The Shawshank Redemption.

And then I tried to ignore that thought. I spent time trying to think of a more recent film. I asked my worship team, and they came up with a long list of good ideas. One of those ideas was to preach about the film “Just Mercy,” based on the life and work of civil rights lawyer Bryan Stevenson. And that suggestion changed my mind. I decided to revisit The Shawshank Redemption and consider it through the lens of all that I have learned since 1994—the work of Bryan Stevenson, the prison abolition movement, my personal and professional understanding of racism and white supremacy culture, and so many recent events that have made us aware of how all these systems of oppression and violence work together to feed each other fear and hatred, and a world view that is diametrically opposed to our seven (soon eight, if we do the right thing) principles.

So, I went back and watched The Shawshank Redemption again. And again. And I was amazed that it has held up so well and grateful for the ways it broke new ground. I can confidently say that it is still on my list of best films, and I am glad to revisit it and reflect with you on redemption, freedom, and hope.

You don't need to know much if you haven't seen the film. It is set in Shawshank Prison over a period of about twenty years starting in 1947. It follows two main characters, Red, played by Morgan Freeman and Andy, played by Tim Robbins. Andy is a new inmate, convicted (wrongly) of the murder of his wife and her lover. Red has been there for years, guilty of a murder he committed when he was young. The film begins when Andy arrives and Red bets the other inmates that he will be the one that breaks down the first night, as someone always does.

Red loses his bet. Andy doesn't break down. He is quiet and keeps to himself, and as Red, who narrates the story says, "I could see why some of the boys took him for snobby. He had a quiet way about him, a walk and a talk that just wasn't normal around here. 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. Yeah, I think it would be fair to say... I liked Andy from the start."

Eventually Andy approaches Red who is known in the prison for being "a guy who can get things" and asks him for a small rock hammer. Red is wary, thinking Andy wants it for a weapon, but Andy convinces him it's just for continuing his rock hounding hobby. When Red asks if it could be used to break out of prison, Andy laughs and says, "When you see it, you'll know what the joke is." Red gets him the rock hammer, which is just about the size of a man's hand, and Red laughs and says, "I imagine it would take a man 600 years to dig their way out of Shawshank with that...."

Andy's life in Shawshank is brutal. He draws the attention of one of the men who, with the power of a gang of followers, terrorizes and subjects Andy to repeated sexual and physical violence. Sometimes Andy is able to fight them off, but often he is not. And yet, Andy goes on being Andy, even asking Red to get him a poster of Rita Hayworth.

And Andy and Red become friends. They have deep conversations, one of the deepest about hope. After Andy gets out of the hole for playing opera over the prison PA system Red asks him why he did it. Andy says, "Music...You need it so you don't forget...that there are places in the world that aren't made of stone. There's something inside that they can't get to, they can't touch. It's yours." What are you talking about? Red asks and Andy says, "Hope." and Red

answers “Let me tell you something. Hope can be a dangerous thing. It can drive a man insane.”

This is the core conflict in *The Shawshank Redemption*. When you know you are sentenced to not one, but two life sentences in this prison where you are at the mercy of a corrupt warden hiding behind his Christian rhetoric, controlling everything with brutality and violence, is hope a good thing or is it dangerous?

Of course, the answer is “both.” And this is why *The Shawshank Redemption* holds up over time. It never shied away from the truth that hope is both dangerous and necessary. The film wrestles this dilemma in many ways, and like Jacob wrestling an angel, we are forever changed by it. Our hearts are broken, healed, and broken and healed again and again. Sometimes it seems like hope—the thing with feathers, as Emily Dickinson so famously said—has fallen to the ground, seemingly dead. And yet...

The Shawshank Redemption is a film that broke ground in my life and I think, in the world. It avoided so many tropes, allowing a real friendship to grow between Red and Andy, a relationship of equals, in which Red isn't reduced to a “Magic Negro” or a sidekick. Red's honest skepticism is as necessary to the story as Andy's hope. When characters suffer, when hope runs out for them, it's Red who tells us how their hearts broke. It's Red's compassion that explains how a man can lose everything to the institution—even how to be free.

And when Andy does manage to dig himself to freedom with that tiny rock hammer—not in 600 years, but in just under 20—it's Red's words that help paint a picture of both the joy and the grief, when he tells us, “I have to remind myself that some birds aren't meant to be caged. Their feathers are just too bright. And when they fly away, the part of you that knows it was a sin to lock them up does rejoice. But still, the place you live in is that much more drab and empty that they're gone. I guess I just miss my friend.”

There is a lot to consider in the story of *The Shawshank Redemption* that holds up over time and circumstance. There is also a lot we've learned. Bryan Stevenson and so many others have shown us, again and again, that what the *Shawshank Redemption* misses is the way the prison system is, and has always been, a part of the way racism and the systems of white supremacy are

upheld and enforced. In reality, Andy and Red would have had a hard time becoming friends across the chasm of race and its effects on their lives.

And while the film reveals the brutality of prison, we know that by turning prisons into businesses that protect their profits at all costs, the conditions are even worse now. Not just violence and bad food, but leaving inmates to die in heat, cold, and of disease, ignoring violence, and using prison labor on chain gangs and fighting fires for ten cents an hour.

The film tries mightily to humanize the men in prison, to show how the system itself is the brutalizer, and how each choice that is made is a choice in response to that brutality—an attempt to survive, to maintain something like hope. And in an ever-more-violent and deadly system, that is a dangerous thing. All around us, there are people trying to continue and even increase the dehumanization of incarcerated people, trading in fear and a world view that tries to convince everyone that anyone incarcerated is unworthy of dignity, compassion, or a chance to try again.

This is where our principles and theology matter most. Our tradition is deeply rooted in the deep belief that what is even more dangerous than hope is the abandonment of it. When we give up our commitment to upholding the worth and dignity of anyone else, we become imprisoned ourselves, even if our cage is gilded and comfortable.

The wisdom of *The Shawshank Redemption* is that it offers us not a choice between hope and danger, but a choice between embracing hope for us all, or abandoning it. When Andy says, “you either get busy living or get busy dying,” he is reminding us that we are not at the mercy of hopelessness. We can choose. Freedom and hope may be dangerous, but they are inside us, untouchable and always ours to choose.

The Shawshank Redemption raises the question of who is imprisoned and who is free? What is the key to the cell of fear and how do we forge it? What I see in the *Shawshank Redemption* is that compassion is connected to freedom and mercy is more powerful than fear. Those who try to control others have neither freedom nor love, just the knowledge that the time will come when they are not the strongest anymore. That fear is the cage they have locked themselves into.

What, in the end, is the redemption in the film? That good men get free, one way or another. That the corrupt do not win. That moments of joy are valuable, so valuable they can help one endure years of suffering. That friendship can overcome hopelessness. That each incarcerated person has a story and a lifetime, and is more than their worst moment. This is a story of hope, and that is the story we want--and this world needs--us to share.

May we choose compassionately, for ourselves and for all who suffer. May it be so. May we be the ones who make it so. Amen. Asé, And Blessed Be.