

The Messenger

SHAWSHANK

By: Pastor Martin Feltz

One of my favorite movies is “The Shawshank Redemption.” It’s a story of hope and perseverance against all odds. Andy Dufresne is falsely accused of murder and sent to Shawshank Prison, where he faces the harsh realities of prison life. But despite the challenges, he never gives up hope and uses his smarts to make the best of his situation. And his friendship with Red is just beautiful - they support each other through thick and thin.

It’s a movie that really makes you think about the power of the human spirit. It’s a great reminder to never give up on your dreams, no matter the obstacles. It’s a story of hope and resilience, and a great example of how our attitudes and actions can shape our lives. It’s also a powerful commentary on the justice system and how it can fail people. But ultimately, it’s a story that inspires us to keep pushing forward and never lose sight of what really matters - that’s the power of Shawshank!

Now, if you think about it, there are some striking parallels between the story of Jesus and The Shawshank Redemption. Both Jesus and Andy were unjustly accused and had to endure great suffering. Both endured physical and emotional pain, and were rejected by their peers. But through it all, they never gave up hope. They both had faith that a better future awaited them, and they remained kind and compassionate despite their circumstances. Ultimately, both Jesus and Andy were able to make a positive impact on the lives of others and were seen as sources of hope and inspiration.

Another similarity is Paul and Silas when they both faced persecution and imprisonment for their beliefs, just like Andy. They were unjustly thrown in prison and beaten, but they remained steadfast in their faith and continued to spread the message of Christianity. And like Andy, they used their time in prison to inspire and encourage others, ultimately leading to the conversion of the jailer and his family. Both stories demonstrate the power of faith, perseverance, and the ability to find hope in even the darkest of circumstances.

A very interesting thing is we can see the presents of joy.

WHAT?

You bet it can!

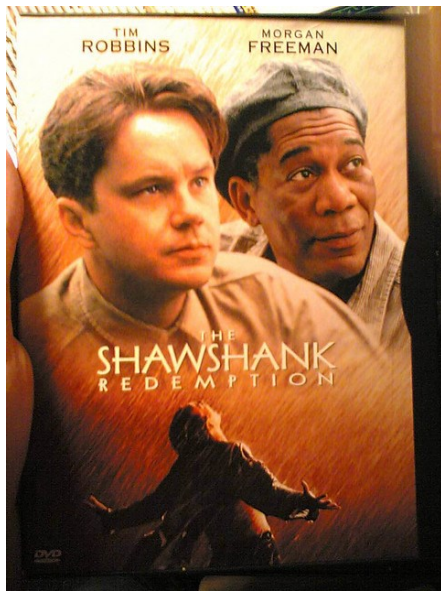


INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- Shawshank1
- Shawshank2
- Shawshank3
- Congregational Report4
- Christian Nationalism5
- Christ and Culture6

SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST

- Welcome to our two newest Voting Members: Josie and Bryan!
- The Last Sunday of every month is the Church Business meeting. Everyone is allowed to stay, but only Voting Members receive the privilege to vote.
- Our Ash Wednesday service was well received! Thanks to all who participated!
- Want to submit an article or idea? Email the church and we will put it into the news letter!



SHAWSHANK

The joy message from the Bible is a central theme throughout the text, and it's certainly present in the stories of Jesus, Paul, Silas, and Andy.

The idea of finding joy in the midst of suffering is a recurring theme.

There are passages in the Bible that talk about finding joy in the Lord, even in the midst of trials and tribulations (James 1:2). Paul, in particular, speaks of finding joy in suffering (Colossians 1:24). So, in a way, the joy message from the Bible is all about finding hope and joy in even the most difficult situations, just like the characters in The Shawshank Redemption.

It's a beautiful message that speaks to the human spirit and our ability to persevere.

The joy message in the Bible also speaks to the idea that joy is not dependent on external circumstances, but rather, it comes from a deep sense of inner peace and a connection to God.

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OVERCOMING WITH JOY

Think of a time when you were able to use joy to overcome your obstacles in life. It might take a little bit but there ARE stories in your life, just like there were for Ol' Andy and Red in Shawshank Redemption. You might have danced with a friend who found out they had a terminal illness. You might have used kind words to deflect a personal attack. You may have buried yourself in the vibrant colors of pigments and paints to create a world of joy when depressed. Regardless of how you did it, God has given you ways to use joy to overcome hardship and embrace happiness.

For example, in Philippians 4:12, Paul says "I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content." This idea of finding joy and contentment in all circumstances is echoed throughout the Bible, from Jesus' teachings on the Sermon on the Mount to the Psalms. It's a reminder that even when the world around us is dark, we can still find joy and hope within ourselves and in our faith.

The joy message is also tied to gratitude and thankfulness. In 1 Thessalonians 5:18, it says, "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." This gratitude and thankfulness in the midst of trials can lead to a deeper sense of joy and peace, even in difficult times.

It's a reminder that there is always something to be thankful for, and that gratitude can shift our perspective and help us find joy in the midst of hardship. It's a beautiful message that can apply to all of us, no matter our circumstances.

Here's another interesting connection:

Both the Bible and The Shawshank Redemption emphasize the power of forgiveness in finding joy and peace. Jesus teaches that forgiveness is central to the Christian faith, and he demonstrates this by forgiving those who crucified him.

Similarly, in The Shawshank Redemption, Andy Dufresne forgives those who have wronged him and finds peace in his own heart. Both stories highlight the transformative power of forgiveness and the role it can play in finding joy and hope in the face of adversity. You see, the power of forgiveness really can't be overstated - it's a power that can break down barriers and help people move forward.

SHAWSHANK CONTINUED

It's a theme that's repeated throughout the Bible and is illustrated so beautifully in *The Shawshank Redemption*.

By practicing forgiveness, people can let go of resentment and bitterness, and instead cultivate compassion and understanding. This can lead to a sense of inner peace and a brighter outlook on life.

The Christian tradition teaches that true joy comes from a relationship with Christ and living in accordance with his teachings. When people allow Christ into their hearts, they can experience a deep, abiding joy that transcends circumstances.

It's a joy that comes from knowing that God is with them, loves them, and is working for their good, even when things are tough.

This joy is not dependent on external circumstances, but rather is a result of knowing God's love and goodness. It's a joy that can bring meaning and purpose to life, even in the darkest of times.

I see a connection in that the main character, Andy, also finds joy in the midst of hardship. Despite being falsely imprisoned, he finds purpose in helping others and ultimately experiences a sense of freedom and joy that goes beyond his physical circumstances.

Just like in the Christian tradition, Andy's joy is rooted in something deeper than his immediate surroundings - it's a joy that comes from doing good and finding meaning in life. Both the Christian tradition and *The Shawshank Redemption* remind us that true joy doesn't come from material possessions or external circumstances, but rather from a deeper sense of purpose and connection.

One more parallel I see is that, in both cases, joy is something that grows over time. In the Christian tradition, the more a person grows in their relationship with Christ, the more joy they experience. It's not something that just magically appears, but rather something that is cultivated through prayer, reading scripture, and living out the teachings of Jesus.

In *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy's joy doesn't come all at once - it's something that develops as he works on the prison library, helps his fellow inmates, and works towards his eventual escape.

It's a reminder that joy is something we have to actively pursue and cultivate in our lives, rather than something that just happens to us.

In conclusion, the idea of finding joy in the midst of hardship is a powerful and enduring theme that is present in both the Christian tradition and *The Shawshank Redemption*.

Whether it's through a relationship with Christ or through one's own actions and character, joy can be cultivated and grown, leading to a sense of purpose, meaning, and freedom that transcends external circumstances.

Joy can be especially difficult to find when we're facing adversity or hardship. It can be easy to fall into despair or bitterness when things aren't going our way. But by cultivating joy, even in those difficult moments, we can find a sense of resilience and strength that can carry us through.

It's not always easy, but it's worth the effort.

In a way, finding joy in the midst of difficulty can be a form of spiritual or personal growth, and it can help us become more compassionate and understanding of others who are also facing challenges.

Jesus is the ultimate example of finding joy in the midst of hardship. Even though he faced immense suffering and persecution, he continued to spread joy and love to those around him. He taught that true joy comes not from external circumstances, but from an inner peace and a connection to God. His life and teachings are a reminder that no matter how difficult things may seem, we can always find joy and hope through faith and love.

It's a powerful message that has inspired people for centuries and continues to do so to this day.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

"Hope is a good thing, maybe even the best of things. And good things never die." — *The Shawshank Redemption*

"Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul - and sings the tunes without the words - and never stops at all." — *Emily Dickenson*

"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." — *Romans 15:13*
NRSVue

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." — *Philippians 2:2*
NRSVue

DIFFERENT OPINIONS, SAME GOD

Good Christian people can have completely different view on faith and religion; that is why there are nearly 45,000 different Christian denominations of the face of the earth. There are, however, a small group of Christians who are fast to condemn those who do not belong to their specific group, church, or tradition claiming to be the “One True Church”. Have you ever encountered this? How do you show compassion to people who may completely disregard your views on faith and life?

CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

Is America a Christian Nation? If so, what kind? Baptist? Catholic? Lutheran? Nondenominational? Should Baptists be forced to baptize their babies like most Christians do? Should Presbyterians be required to immerse their followers in a river rather than be sprinkled? Christian Nationalism says that America is a Christian nation and no other faiths should be represented, but the issue with that is that not all Christians even agree as to what being “Christian” is. The best way to preserve religion liberty, which is a fundamental principle of Christianity, is by allowing all people to practice their faith in peace. This is called the Priesthood of All Believers and is found in scripture such as 1 Peter 2:9 and Revelation 5:10.

Do you think humans should tell each other how to worship God? What do you think Jesus would say? What do you think?

CONGREGATIONAL REPORT

The congregation of Grace Christian Church sat in open session on February 18, 2024 and these were the decisions which were rendered:

- 1) The Church—through unanimous vote— modified the Church Bylaws in the section concerning deacons. Those changes have been ratified by the Board and are now in full force and affect. Should you need the most up-to-date version of the bylaws, feel free to speak to Daniel before or after service. As the Secretary to the Church & the Board of Elders, he maintains all the records for the church.
- 2) The Church tabled a decision to fix the roof at this point until further investigation could be made regarding the insurance policy practices. The Secretary will bring a report of that to the Church on the next business meeting on March 17, 2024.
- 3) The Church has decided to start holding a Wednesday night potluck starting in April! Just fix what you have, and bring it in; after dinner, we will have Christian Education & Faith Formation where we will discuss Christian history, Evolution of the Church, different Christian Traditions and Denominations as well as anything else you'd like to learn about. Should you like to submit a

request for study, please email it to: gracechristian-churchinc@gmail.com, or you can let Marty, Esther, or Daniel know.

Here are some general things the Church should know about and/or remember

- 1) There has been slight movement with the 501(c)(3) status of the church. The 180 day determination period has come and went. A determination should be forthcoming in days.
- 2) When you leave a room, please make sure that the lights are off. Our biggest operating expense are utilities, so we are trying to save as much as possible.

Lastly:

A massive thank you to Bryan Paul for all the work he put into the grounds on 02/20/24 and 02/22/24. He removed the “Frist” from the front of the building, collected and removed all the pinecones and fallen limbs, patched the potholes in the road, allowed the church to use his professional grade carpet cleaner, and helped remove all the brush from the church property! You and Joise are a true blessing to this Faith Community!

CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM 101: WHAT IS IT? AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

By: Mike Kiniry, Originally Published on November 2023 by NPR

It's becoming increasingly common for some political leaders in the United States — including here in Florida — to use language and put forward policies that conflate American identity with religious identity. Many are focusing on issues like abortion, same-sex marriage, and trans rights — and critics say this trend represents a rise in what's called Christian Nationalism.

Christian Nationalism is best summarized as the belief that the history and character of the United States is defined by Christianity, and that the government should take active steps to keep it that way to the detriment of other faiths.

Our guest counts himself among its critics, and says that while supporters of Christian Nationalism portray it as a social movement, it's actually a well-organized political movement that seeks to gain political power and to impose its vision of religion on all of society.

“Christian Nationalism is best summarized as the belief that the history and character of the United States is defined by Christianity [not just shaped by it], and that the government should take active steps to keep it that way...”

Rev. Paul Raushenbush is an ordained Baptist minister, and he is President and CEO of Interfaith Alliance, a national nonprofit founded in 1994 to advocate for religious freedom and pluralism in the U.S.

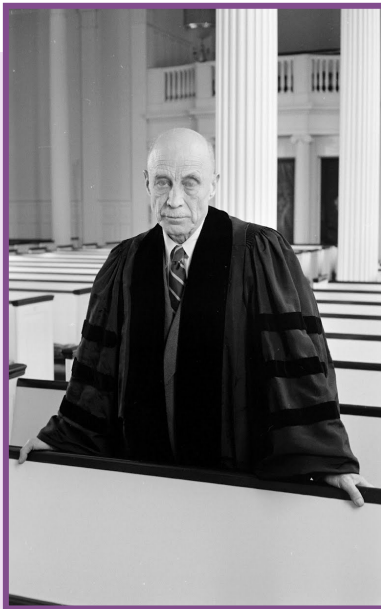
He is a longtime leader in the interfaith movement working to protect an inclusive vision of religious freedom for people of all faiths and none. He is the great-grandson of the first Jewish Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis and great-grandson of Baptist theologian Walter Rauschenbusch, a key figure in the Social Gospel movement.

We spoke with him on this show back in February before he came to town to give a talk titled “Confronting Christian Nationalism: Advancing True Religious Freedom & Pluralism.” He's returning to southwest Florida this Thursday, November 9 at 7:00 pm to give a follow up talk at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Naples titled “Christian Nationalism 101: What is it? And why does it matter?” It's sponsored by the Interfaith Alliance of Southwest Florida, an affiliate of the national Interfaith Alliance that was launched following the February event.

Rev. Rauschenbusch's presentation on Thursday will be followed by responses from a panel of local leaders: Rabbi Adam Miller, Rev. Dr. Barrion Staples, Cori Craciun, and Kathy Curatolo.

To find the original release of this article go to:

<https://news.wgcu.org/show/gulf-coast-life/2023-11-06/confronting-christian-nationalism-advancing-true-religious-freedom-pluralism>



WHO WAS NIEBUHR?

Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962) was a world famous American theologian, ethicist, philosopher, scholar, and minister in the Congregational Christian Church Tradition. He taught at Yale Divinity School while he preached and taught throughout church in New England. His most influential book, *Christ and Culture* published in 1951, is still taught in seminaries around the world.

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CHRIST AND CULTURE: THE 5 MODELS

By: Daniel Coffey

In seminary, I learned that there are five major ways to view how our faith interacts with the culture, and thus the world around us and at large. These five approaches will determine how we interpret scripture, how we relate to government, and even how we treat others who do not belong to our faith tradition, should that be for better or for worse. Brilliantly explored by Richard Niebuhr in his book by the same name of this article, *Christ and Culture*, these Five Models allow us to understand why some Christians greatly disagree with the culture around them whereas other do not. They are as follows:

Christ Against Culture

In the 'Christ Against Culture' model, culture outside of the church is seen as corrupted beyond repair. Christians should avoid, reject, and separate from culture. These Christians look to create a pure Christian culture apart from the culture of the world around them, often to the exclusion of the rest of the world. This is often the idea of Christian Nationalism.

Christ of Culture

In the 'Christ of Culture' model, culture is seen as inherently good and without any conflict to Christian truth. Proponents of this view attempt to view Christian Truths equally to cultural truths. In reality, though, cultural values generally outweigh the values of Christianity.

Christ Above Culture

In the 'Christ Above Culture' model, culture is seen as basically good. However, Christian revelation is required to best explain and perfect those cultural expressions. Niebuhr points to churches such as Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches which tend to fall into this view. This model can lead to the institutionalization of Christianity through finite and materialistic expressions.

Christ and Culture in Paradox

In the 'Christ and Culture in Paradox' model, there is a tension that is ever-present between the Christian and their interaction with culture. Christians are forced to simultaneously live between the kingdom of this world and the Kingdom of Heaven by accepting some aspects of culture and rejecting others. Niebuhr points to Martin Luther as an example of this view. The tenets of this model, while more accurate in its description of how Christians experience the world, can lead to a more conservative engagement with culture.

Christ as Transformer of Culture

In this final model, the Christian is seen as a conversionist, a person who seeks to transform the values and objectives of culture to the service and glory of God. Christ came to redeem all of creation, and as Christians, we are to participate in this redemptive work now, while awaiting his coming Kingdom. Niebuhr points to John Calvin and Augustine as holders of this view. It is the view traditionally held by Christians in the Reformed tradition.

Now, having learned of these, to which model/ approach do you subscribe? How do you think your view of how Christ interacts with culture flavors your Christian experience? What do you think you could learn from people who use a different model? Take a few moments this week to ponder these questions. Our faith is so much more than, "I read the Bible and believe it". There is always an interplay between what we have been taught and what the Bible actually says.