



Tomorrow will mark three months since the first Sunday we did not worship together in the same sanctuary. March 15 was devastating, to say the least. This was not just a usual cancelation due to icy blizzard conditions. This was an invisible invasion on our living, and most of us could not have envisioned that the coronavirus would have so impacted us in a variety of ways for such an extensive period of time.

However, if there was an industry that actually benefited from so many people staying

home against their wishes, it was that of Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney+, and so many other entertainment services that only required you turn on an electronic device, put in your credit card number, and then, instantly reel you in for hours upon hours upon hours of your life that you would never get back; that would almost have you convinced that it may not be such a terrible thing to stay home, after all.

With that in mind, there is this movie that has been re-played on cable networks, even long before COVID-19 came along, ever since it was released in theaters just over 25 years ago now (you can, also, find it on the aforementioned Netflix and Amazon Prime platforms). Just so you know, it is a film that holds a special place in the hearts of so many in the small town I grew up in of Upper Sandusky, Ohio: one of those places that if you drive alongside it on the state highways of 23 or 30 in northwest Ohio, you could very well blink and miss it altogether. Only about 6,500 people live there in the mostly farming community.

Nevertheless, in the mid 1990's, actors Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman had to venture into the speck of a town in comparison to their immensely chaotic Hollywood base, to film a couple of the scenes that would become part of the production known as *The Shawshank Redemption*. Suffice it to say, the movie is not meant for younger viewers, as it is a screen-adaptation of a Stephen King novel, where the main character, Andy Dufresne (played by Tim Robbins) is sentenced to two life sentences at Shawshank State Prison, where he meets his soon-to-be friend, Red (played by Morgan Freeman). The trial scene where Dufresne receives his devastating verdict is filmed in the county courthouse of Upper Sandusky. Later in the film, Red is doing some wood-working, which takes place in what used to be the Stephen Lumber Company only a few blocks away from that courthouse. It may not seem like much, but for us from Upper Sandusky, we will gladly take all we can get in the public recognition department, thank you very much!

But the reason why I bring up this dramatic Hollywood production, that attempts to romanticize prison life, in a way: just like with any other good movie that will get replayed on television ad nauseum for decades after its release, it has to have those memorable one-liners. Those lines that will be artistically rendered into posters, and copied and pasted onto people's Facebooks and Instagrams as favorite catch-phrases: worded just precisely in the film, with just the right orchestral music in the background, and the actor speaking it with just the right amount of levity and conviction, so as to have the viewer believe it is just as true as the very Gospel of Jesus Christ itself.

In *The Shawshank Redemption*, the one line most quoted by fans and those who have never seen the movie at all, is when Andy, after his escape from prison, writes a letter to his friend, Red: “Remember, Red, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.” It almost sounds biblical, as if Hollywood screenwriters are paraphrasing the Apostle Paul in his blessed re-assurance to the scared-out-of-their-absolute-minds Roman Christians: “hope does not disappoint us” (Romans 5:5). And so it may be rather fitting for the context of this Hollywood production based in the Ohio State Reformatory (some of which still stands to this day in Mansfield, Ohio), where prisoners are often frightened for their life in the film. Except, the greater meaning behind Andy’s words is that it is, in fact, a direct response to Red’s one-liner earlier in the movie, when Andy is just starting his time in prison. Red says, “Let me tell you something my friend. Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane.”

Is it possible both sets of Hollywood one-liners can be true for some people? The hope of a better life out of the midst of crippling poverty that...never comes. The hope of Roman Christians for basic human survival with persecution raging around them, and yet...far too many perished for simply believing that the son of a carpenter was much more than that for the whole world. The hope for our loved ones to survive a devastating disease, but the fight...was too much for them to endure. Andy’s classic quotable one-liner is nice and all, but we know of too many good ones who have died from our life, who are no longer here quite the same as we wish.

In the end, though, the ultimate power behind Paul’s classic one-liner are the words that are often looked over in the quote that people like to put on posters or copy and paste ad nauseum on the internet: the “suffering [that] produces endurance” and on and on. But, that *hope* word, Paul was scripting, was not some distant thing for the future. It’s not when we all return to somewhat normalcy, when a vaccine is developed, and COVID-19 is completely conquered. It’s not when we reach some level of comfort and fulfillment through life circumstances. It’s not when we die and enter a Kingdom of everlasting life. No, Paul believes that God has already deeply etched that hope of everlasting life into our hearts, and not with any of the Almighty holding back on us either. God has already poured eternal life out upon us. We are already living in the hope of Christ’s Resurrection reality, and that hope can never be taken away from us. So, in that sense, Andy’s cliché one-liner may just turn out to be right, after all.

Granted, there are most certainly the days when we can understand where Red’s character is coming from: so many things about this life going unfulfilled from others, from places of work, from the church, even from our very selves. And yet, in the depths of our heart remains the Holy Spirit that continues in full force in making sure we never forget that the very God who went to the cross for us, and came out of the tomb for us, has still never left us. No matter what may ensue around us, the love we have from God in Christ Jesus our Lord remains fully intact, to forever impact not only how we see the world, including other children of God, but even our own life in the eyes of the God Who deemed us more than worthy of all the hope brought to life in Christ Jesus, our still-Risen, Lord! And for that, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!