

TITLE: "Escaping from Prison"

TEXT: Lamentations 3:19-24 (NT p. 766)

¹⁹The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! ²⁰My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.

²¹But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: ²²The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; ²³they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ²⁴"The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in God."

Introduction – *The Shawshank Redemption*

Quite some time ago I watched the DVD *The Shawshank Redemption* starring Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman. In the movie, Tim Robbins stars as a young successful banker named Andy Dufresne who is falsely convicted of murdering his wife and her lover. Andy is sentenced to two life sentences in the notoriously brutal state penitentiary called Shawshank Prison. While there, Andy begins a friendship with Red, played by Morgan Freeman. It's a rather long and involved story, and parts are just plain brutal, but its redeeming theme is hope; hope in the midst of circumstances where there is absolutely no reason TO hope.

Andy's hope is to escape the confinement and brutality of prison and live in a small town on the west coast of Mexico called Zihuatanejo, where he plans to buy a hotel, fix up an old boat, and take his guests out fishing. At one point, he asks Red to join him there and be his assistant. But this pie in the sky stuff is too much for Red and he says [in anger]: "Let me tell you something, Andy Dufresne. Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane. It's got no use on the inside [of prison]."

But Andy continues to hope and to encourage hope in others. Andy expands the prison library and encourages the others to read. He helps a young inmate get his GED. One day Andy somehow manages to play an excerpt from the opera *The Marriage of Figaro* over the public address system so that all the inmates can hear it. It was a moving moment for which Andy expected, and received, a long stretch in solitary confinement.

But that glimmer of hope in the midst of hopelessness was well worth it to Andy. After twenty years in Shawshank Prison for a crime he did not commit, Andy finally escapes. Soon after, Red is paroled. Red finds himself living in a drab apartment and bagging groceries at a supermarket for minimum wage. Life is so boring that he considers committing a crime so he will be sent back to his familiar life in prison. Then he remembers that Andy had told him that if he should ever be freed, he should visit a specific hayfield in Buxton where he would find a package Andy left there. Red

decides to go, and there he finds a cache of money and a note left by Andy, which encourages him to join him in Zihuatenejo. Red then violates his parole and goes to Fort Hancock, Texas, so that he can sneak across the border to Mexico.

1. Tough times

Our text this morning is from the book of Lamentations. The whole book is an expression of grief over the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Although Lamentations is anonymous, the author was probably the prophet Jeremiah. Prophets didn't have it easy in those days. Jeremiah preached a message of doom and gloom, which few appreciated. He had no wife or children and very few friends. At one point he was exiled to Egypt. Throughout his life, he lived a hand to mouth existence. In this morning's text, he laments the fact that he is homeless and destitute.

There are a LOT of people who have no home to go to right now. 95% of the town of Owego was flooded. One of the elders who serves with me on my presbytery committee lives in Owego and the flood waters were two feet deep in his lower story. Carol and I drove through Owego this past Thursday. It is obvious that flood waters were higher than the first stories of the buildings on the main street. People have piled sodden couches, muddy clothes, broken TVs, carpeting, wet drywall, mattresses and children's toys on the sidewalks so that it looks like the buildings are surrounded by walls.

Part of having hope ourselves is providing hope for others. Jesus tells us that those who follow him will love God and love their neighbors as themselves. Who are our neighbors? Jesus tells us they are people in need. Just as Andy gave hope to those in need in prison, so should we give hope to those in need.

Many churches in our presbytery are sending work teams to help people clean up their homes, churches and businesses. If you would like to help in this way, please let me know and I will direct you to those who are coordinating those efforts. ...I am asking those who can't join a work team to make a donation to help their efforts. People in our denomination and presbytery are helping to connect those who suffered losses with federal aid programs. Our donations will go to help people with their day to day needs until their lives can be put back together.

All I can say is that we, as Christians, will find hope ourselves as we extend help and hope to others in need.

2. Why do Christians experience hard times?

Why do Christians, like my friend in Owego, have to go through hard times? ...I don't know why in each specific case, but I do know that we all do. It is a proud tradition. Jeremiah had it rough. We can read about all Paul went through in 2 Corinthians 11 and it's a miracle that he survived. The sinless Son of God, who we follow, DIDN'T survive and Jesus left this world on a cross of utter anguish and agony.

When Christians suffer, it oftentimes seems like it is too late for help to come. ...At the end of the first semester in my third year at seminary, we ran out of money. We had sold everything we had to sell to go to seminary because we thought that was God had told us to do. I had started a window washing business that was doing well, but then I had severe back spasms and was unable to continue. I was angry at God because it seemed like we had sacrificed it all for nothing.

On the way to the registrar's office to withdraw from seminary, I went to the financial aid office to see if there was any hope for financial aid. The lady there said there was nothing available. I turned to go and as I walked out the door, she said, "Wait a minute. I just received a letter from someone. He thought that if Satan wanted to get someone out of seminary, he might use a physical affliction to do it, so he is offering grants to people in seminary who have an accident or physical problem."

I applied and received a \$5,000 grant, which got us through the next semester when was able to go back to work.

Why does God sometimes wait until it seems like it is too late for help to arrive? ...So that we will know, we will KNOW, that the answer is from God. It is very easy for us to trust in ourselves, in other people or in luck. And I'm SURE there were those who stood with dry feet on the shore of the Red Sea that God had just parted who said, "Wow! were we luck that wind came up when it did!" ...Don't be one of them. When your answer comes, always remember to give all the credit to God and to thank the Lord.

3. Staying hopeful

So, how do we stay hopeful when we are going through hard times? In this morning's text, the author of Lamentations says:

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."

Our hope is not to be in ourselves, in other people or in luck. Our hope is to be in the Lord. And we CAN hope in God if we know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that God loves us, God knows our needs, and God will provide what we need when we need it before it is too late.

One thing that helps me to hang on to this hope is reading the daily devotional *Jesus Calling* by Sarah Young. In the June 11th selection, she hears Jesus say:

Trust Me and don't be afraid, for I am your strength.... Do not let fear dissipate your energy. Instead, invest your energy in trusting Me.... The battle for control of your mind is fierce... You are not alone in this struggle with your mind. My Spirit living within you is ever ready to help you in this striving. Ask [Jesus] to control your mind; He will bless you with life and peace.

Conclusion – Escaping from prison

I am beginning to realize that a lot of the reason I am not hopeful all the time is because of my mind. I often face situations that seem overwhelming to me. But it's not just the situation itself, most is really the worry my mind generates ABOUT the situation that saps my hope.

When our minds get stuck on negative and anxious thoughts, it becomes like a prison keeps us from the freedom of the Lord's hope and joy. It's not a physical prison, like Shawshank, but it is prison nonetheless. ...Jesus will help us escape from this prison of worry if we will stay close to Jesus each and every day.

At the end of that movie, *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy and Red are standing together on the sugar-white beach of Zihuatanejo looking out upon the aqua waters of the Pacific Ocean. The hope they had had in prison, which had seemed utterly impossible at the time, had been realized.

As Christians, we too have hope. And, like Andy and Red, we can hang onto that hope even in the midst of our suffering.

Our hope is in our Lord Jesus Christ. And we can be assured, as Jeremiah was, that the steadfast love of the Lord NEVER ceases.

And we can trust that someday we will stand with our Lord Jesus Christ, on that beautiful shore, and know that we will be living with Jesus in love, joy and peace forever and ever. ...Amen.