A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*“Looking for Hope”*

Matthew 2

January 6, 2019

Thomas Merton wrote numerous letters, essays, books, and prayers. He wrote with penetrating insight into the human condition: our spirituality, politics, our sins, the human psyche. He was and remains a guiding light of spiritual wisdom for many. When Pope Francis addressed the US Congress a few years ago, he named 4 exemplary Americans whose “hard work and sacrifice -- some at the cost of their lives,” were able to build “a better future” and shape fundamental American values. Merton was one of them. But nothing Merton wrote has had the enduring legacy of a prayer he wrote that begins, “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.” Something about that simple confession has touched the hearts of many who have uttered the same sort of confession in their lost moments. I have no idea where I am going.

The new year, I guess, is supposed to be about gaining certainty about where you are going. If you don’t know already, you’re supposed to have it figured out by the time the ball drops and the confetti falls. A couple of weeks ago, I received an email from the CEO of a pastoral leadership institute that began, “If you’re anything like me, you spend the last week of the year evaluating your past year and making strategic plans for the year to come.”

Well, that made me feel tired. No, if you’re anything like me, you spent the last week of the year eating cheese, driving across the state, fighting a cold, watching football, catching your breath when you can in the holiday season, and trying to genuinely take to heart the feast of the celebration of the birth of our Savior.

No, if you’re anything like me you spent the last week of the year playing board games and watching movies with your kids, assembling toys, choking on credit cards bills, and imagining a wild and crazy New Year’s Eve for 5 minutes before realizing just how great it is to be at home when the ball drops.

Evaluating the past year and making strategic plans? Maybe for some people, but if you’re anything like a lot of people, you spent the last week of the year nursing the poignant holiday pain of lost loved ones and the relational strain of loved ones still here. You tried to spend time with people you don’t spend enough time with. If you’re anything like a lot of people, you made a year-end donation to a church or non-profit or you wished you could, you worked a little overtime or tried to, or you took a little trip, or wanted to. Maybe next year.

If you’re anything like a lot of people, you did any number of things on the last week of the year besides make strategic plans for the year to come.

But the calendar does turn, the new year begins and the new year does often come with some new energy, born of excitement for a new growth opportunity, or dedication to a new discipline, or resolve to make a hard decision about a hard problem.

In the new year, a new chapter is being written. What will it say?

A door is open? Where does it lead?

A new journey is beginning. Where does it take me?

The earth’s lap around the sun begins again and we get to ride this planet one more time. How exciting.

I do think this time between Christmas and Epiphany can be a time to reflect on the season and consider the challenges and opportunities of the year ahead. If the magi are truly wise, they give us some idea of what to do: in the darkness, when you have no idea where you are going, look for the light. The light will show the way.

The great promise of the prophet Isaiah was of a revelation that may feel familiar in more than one person’s life. ‘darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness shall cover the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Lift up your eyes and look around. You shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice.” Isaiah’s not alone.

Darkness and then light.

Lost and then found

Slave and now free

Prodigal and then home

Foolish and then wise

Dead and then alive

These are the signposts of biblical hope for pilgrims wandering on the journey of life. Where there is darkness, there will be light, if you know where to look/if you have the courage to look.

But you have to look. In biblical terms, often the word for look is spelled hope.

Hope is at the center of the story of the Shawshank Redemption. I’d forgotten how good this movie is until I came across it again (while eating cheese, and folding laundry, thank you) on the last week of my year. Remember this film? It tells the story of Andy, wrongly convicted and sentenced to multiple life terms in brutal Shawshank prison. Over the years, Andy manages to survive and then makes something of a life within those walls, but he never gives up hope, that thing he describes on the inside of a person that the prison or any darkness can’t take from you, they can’t get to. In one scene at the mess hall table, Andy tells a group of men about what enabled him to survive a month when the warden threw him in the isolation cell. Music was inside him, in here he said pointing to his head, in here he said pointing to his heart. That’s the beauty of music, they can’t get that from you. In prison, he said, is where music makes the most sense, you need it so you don’t forget there are places in the world that are not made out of stone, there’s something inside they can’t get to, they can’t touch, that’s yours.

What you talking about? They asked him. Hope.

That’s when Red interrupts. The story seems like it’s about Andy, Andy wrongly convicted, Andy who diligently chiseled a hole behind a poster in the wall of his cell for 20 years. Andy who one night disappeared through that hole and escaped to freedom. The movie seems like it’s a story about Andy’s resiliency and escape from his wrongful imprisonment.

But the story is really about Red. The question of the whole movie is whether Red’s hopelessness in Shawshank can be redeemed.

Red hears Andy talking about hope and he wants nothing to do with it. Let me tell you something my friend, Red replied from across the table. Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope will drive a man insane. It’s got no use on the inside, you better get used to that idea.

Like for many other people, Red’s hopelessness is a shield for his heart, it’s a wall of protection built high for his sanity. It’s not only the prayer, Lord I have no idea where I’m going, but it’s the prayer, Lord, I don’t think going anywhere is even possible.

Red didn’t. For years, decades he served his time, denied parole time after time. Until, one day, as an old man, Red was set free. Stepping outside the prison walls, trying to figure out how to make a normal life, he had no idea where he was going. He was free from the prison, but not from the darkness that still lived inside him. Then he remembered before Andy escaped all those years ago, he’d told him if he ever got out to hunt for a particular rock, on a particular wall, under a particular oak tree in the corner of a particular field. There would be something waiting for him there.

In a poignant scene, Red looks in a pawn shop window and sees a gun and a compass. He has a choice to make. The way of death or the way of life. The way of darkness or the way of light. The way of despair or the way of hope. Red looks to the light.

With his new compass. Red travels to where Andy had told him, hunts for the place, finds it, moves the rock, and finds a box waiting for him there, with a note from his friend, money in an envelope for a bus ticket, and the first glimmer of hope in a new life.

Shawshank is a story of hope in hopelessness, light in darkness for the Andy’s of the world who never give up hope and seem to have a determined sense that they are going somewhere whatever it takes to get there, and the Reds of the world who have no idea where they are going or even if there’s anywhere to go. The New year dawns on everyone, the hopeful and hopeless. And, this is God’s truth, there’s light for everyone too, somewhere, somehow. There’s light.

Even in the psalmist’s despair of If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,” the psalmist holds on to hope: even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.”

In 1646, Andreas Hammerschmidt wrote a short piece of Christmas music. This was written around New years in 1646, a terrible time. The 30 years’ war was now 28 years long. Hammerschmidt and his family were refugees from their home. It was a dark, hard time. So where in that darkness did he get the inspiration, the courage, to write a song that begins and ends with Alleluia? The first verse is:

Rejoice, all Christians,
Rejoice, whoever is able,
God has done great things for us.
Rejoice with mighty voice
that he loved us so dearly
as to have become our friend.

Joy, joy upon joy!
Christ defends us from all suffering.
Delight, delight upon delight!
He is the Sun of Grace.

This is hope if it’s anything at all, music inside you no one and nothing can take away. This is the fruit of looking to the light.

The light is there, whether a strange star in the sky, or the dawning sun after a cold night, or an inner illumination when one day you can see a future and a hope you couldn’t see before. The light is there. The light of the world has come. We look for it and follow where it leads, where he leads, the light of the world come to us in the flesh.

For the poet Michael Coffey, God’s guiding light was never a bright clear star leading the way. In his poem *Epiphany One way or the Other* he acknowledges for some people it is like that, “For you it might be a magic light appearing in the beckoning western sky . . .you found it, you felt it, you lucky star-gazing fool.”

“For me” he writes, “it was a slow mystery emerging from darkness, a sliver of silver working its way through the hairline cracks of my life . . .emerging like Venus through January clouds, the Epiphany, the star, the shining that only comes in the night.”

For those whose prayer is “I have no idea where I am going” God’s guiding light comes in different ways. The gospels don’t promise God’s light refracts in the same way for everyone, but they do tell us to keep our eyes open, watch, keep awake.

The movie Shawshank is from a novella that doesn’t end with Red finding Andy on the Mexican beach like in the movie’s Hollywood resolution. The novella leaves us wondering, as Red ends his story on a bus headed south:

“I find I'm so excited that I can barely sit still or hold a thought in my head. I think it's the excitement only a free man can feel. A free man at a start of a long journey whose conclusion is uncertain. I hope I can make it across the border. I hope to see my friend and shake his hand. I hope the Pacific is as blue as it has been in my dreams. I hope.”

The magi left their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh with the newborn king of Israel and departed for home by another way. What did they have as they left emptyhanded into a new world, but hope for this child and his family, and a prayer that God’s light would shine on this family, on this child, and through him on the whole world.

It’s our prayer still today, for all who are walking in deep darkness and do not know where to go. And such is the prayer of the last verse of Hammerschmidt’s war-time, far from home, sing in the darkness, hope upon hope music:

Jesus, lead your followers

Deeper and deeper into grace.

Grant, we pray you,

Renewal to your brothers:

Give to all Christ’s people

Peace and a blessed year.

Joy, joy upon joy! Alleluia.

Copyright by Eric Howell, 2019