

Pentecost, Fire, and Film: *Avatar*
Larry Reimer
The United Church of Gainesville,
May 23, 2010

From *Avatar*: Neytiri - *You people from earth cannot learn. You do not see.*

Jake Sully – Then teach me how to see.

Neytiri – No one can teach you how to see.

John 14:15-21 - *...God will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.*

This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees it or knows it. You know this Spirit because it abides with you, and it will be in you.

Acts 2: 17 *This is what I will do in the last days, God says:*

I will pour out my Spirit on everyone.

Your sons and daughters will proclaim my message;

Your young will see visions and your old will dream dreams.

I like to share a sermon each year on the Academy Award winning film, or at least what I perceive to be the runner-up, to see how the film reflects or proclaims the values and interests of our time. I chose not to preach on this year's winner, "The Hurt Locker" because *Avatar* was so packed with grand mythological and archetypal themes as well as a futuristic challenge to the preservation of our world.

The word "Avatar" is Sanskrit for a deity that takes human form, and the film *Avatar* travels back and forth between human and holy worlds.

It begins by telling us that in the year 2154, the people of the earth have polluted and imperiled their planet, and the US has established a military/scientific research colony on the distant planet of Pandora. There they seek to mine a precious mineral, named unobtainium that will provide the energy source necessary to support human life on earth. It's not clear whether they want to save earth or sell the unobtainium for \$20 million a kilo. That clumsy, overly obvious word, "unobtainium" was actually coined by U.S. scientists in the 1950's to describe rare or non-existent materials.

Pandora in Greek mythology is the name of the first woman created by the gods who endowed her with many talents. Aphrodite gave her beauty, Apollo music, Hermes persuasion and so on. Hence her name Pan-dora means "all-gifted." We know the saying, "that's like opening Pandora's box." This refers actually to a later story in Pandora's mythology in which she was given a jar and told not to open it. Like Adam and Eve with the forbidden fruit of the garden, Pandora was curious, opened the jar, then quickly closed the lid but not before all the evil in it had escaped into the world, except for one thing that lay at the bottom, and that was hope. So we are presented with this new planet, Pandora, into which earthlings unleash all the evil that destroyed their own planet, but which contains within itself, hope.

In the mission to Pandora, wheelchair-bound former marine corporal Jake Sully takes the place of his recently deceased twin brother who had been in training to become an Avatar, a hybrid life form with earthly human DNA in the body of a Na'vi, the name of the beautiful creatures who live on Pandora. The Na'vi have shining, lithe, blue bodies with sharply contrasting yellow eyes. They glide through the stunning forests of Pandora where they live in harmony with nature.

Jake Sully is thus transformed into a Na'vi and deposited among the Na'vi people, initially as a double agent. His first purpose is to work with Dr. Grace Augustine (isn't that a wonderfully symbolic name?) played by Sigourney Weaver. She is a scientist trying to "win the hearts and minds" of the people so they will voluntarily move from the site of their majestic sacred tree which grows over the unobtainium.

Sully's other handler is the wicked Colonel Miles Quaritch, a combination of General George Patton and General Jack D. Ripper from "Dr. Strangelove". He secretly asks Sully to gather information about the Na'vi so if they don't voluntarily leave the forest the military contractors will know how to destroy them. The Colonel promises Sully, who is paraplegic, that in return for his service he will arrange the surgery Sully needs to walk again but can't afford on veterans' benefits. Evidently even in 2154, health care provides its greatest gifts only to the wealthy and the connected.

Sully is transported in his new blue Na'vi body into our dream forest, if we dream in magnificent color, where we float among hills and soar from tree to tree. It's the Garden Crosby, Stills, and Nash and Young want to get back to, the Garden of Eden, the place of the noble savage, uncorrupted by the greed of our civilization. It's the forest primeval. It's the magic woods of fairy tales.

In the myths of adult fairy tales, men often have difficulty with the forest because they consider the wilderness a challenge to be conquered and tamed. And sure enough, Sully encounters and battles with giant reptiles and birds, packs of snarling doglike beasts, huge insects, and hammerhead quasi-dinosaurs, until he faces certain doom. He tries to beat the forest, but the forest wins.

The Na'vi princess, Neytiri enters to rescue him. Also in classic adult fairy tales and myth, women find the forest a safe and nurturing respite. Neytiri and the Na'vi are symbolic of the native, aboriginal, and indigenous people everywhere who have learned to bless and cooperate with nature rather than dominate it. Nature in turn blesses them.

As Neytiri teaches Sully the ways of the forest, he travels back and forth between the Na'vi and the military research station. The blue/green translucent pastels of the Na'vi forest are always in stark contrast to the harsh gray, olive-drab industrial sealed pods of the research station whose agents are monstrous giant steel helicopters, half tracks, and slashing walkers always ready to attack. Earthlings are the aliens on this planet.

Sully is won over by the beauty of the Na'vi ways. Neytiri brings him to their Tree of Souls whose roots are bio energetically connected to all living things. The

Na'vi have braids that plug into trees and creatures, something like unto but even more mystical than sex, a uniting and bonding of energy that reminds them of their interconnectedness. Neytiri teaches Sully how to see through the eyes of the forest and its creatures.

The key of love and understanding among the Na'vi is seeing. Instead of saying, "I love you", they say, "I see you." To see and be seen is the key to the balance of life.

There is a Na'vi communion-like meditation around the Tree of Souls with chanting, singing and floating petal-like seed pods that reminds me of the best worship experiences I have ever had on UCG retreats.

The Na'vis say that everyone is born twice. The second time is when you earn your place among the people forever. Sully finds himself reborn. His worlds have traded places. The avatar dream is now his reality. The earth mission has become his nightmare.

Of course the film's critics point out that same cliché we saw in "Dances with Wolves", "Pocahontas", and "A Man Called Horse" happening all over again. Sully has gone native. But clichés originate from a truth that needs to be continually revealed in new forms because we still have not come to grips with it.

We know what will happen next. Sully explains to the Colonel that the Na'vi will never leave the land of the sacred tree, confirming the Colonel's thesis that it is useless to try to convince native people to leave their land when there is something in it that the dominant power wants. Better to simply make them an enemy in order to justify destroying them. It's the same old story. President Bush called in "Shock and Awe." General Curtis Le May wanted to nuke the Vietnamese back to the Stone Age.

The battle erupts, looking like every battle we saw of helicopters descending on the jungles of Vietnam, firing their machine guns and scorching the earth with napalm. It's the same story repeated in Iraq, Afghanistan, and in Gaza.

The battle was different in that unlike most war films, we experienced it from the perspective of the victims on the ground rather than the warriors in the sky. Now, my argument with this film is that it had no new perspective on solving violent conflict. The Na'vi, though noble and brave, could not overcome the American military might with their bows and arrows, even by drawing together all their tribes into one cooperative force. What ultimately destroyed the giant evil military machines was that nature itself rose up against them. The same beasts that threatened Sully in the opening of the film now take up the fight against the half tracks, tanks, and gunships. The Hammerhead dinosaurs with their impenetrable skin, the flying pterodactyls that swooped down from the sky, and every other creature of Pandora stop the invading aliens and send the survivors back to the earth they had already wrecked.

My wish is that all the creativity that James Cameron summoned up in creating the beauty of Pandora and its people could have also been used to find some third way between violence and passive acceptance of the domination system.

Can no film maker, with all their visions of new heavens and new earth, envision a non-violent solution to our problems?

There is a poignant closing scene in the research station where the scientists watch from their TV monitors as the sacred tree is destroyed and the Na'vi are killed, and they weep. Could none of those scientists have chosen to take the road less travelled earlier to refuse the military their wisdom?

But like the single gift of hope left in Pandora's jar, I hope this film will open the eyes of its viewers to truly see. If enlightenment among the Na'vi consists in seeing and being seen, can the millions upon millions who have seen this film possibly realize that we, the Americans, are the military expeditionary force in this film? Can we see that we are not the kind and caring Na'vi? Will the millions who watch this film and both cry and cheer for the Na'vi realize that our planet is in great danger from the same fossil fuel dependence that destroys earth in 2154? Can America's hearts and minds be changed by the experience of this film?

We are all weeping right now for the range of destruction that the BP oil rig Deepwater Horizon catastrophe has wreaked upon the Gulf of Mexico. Amid all the attempts to find out who is accountable for the unspeakable damage that is resulting from this disaster that has at this moment no solution in sight, we neglect to realize that we are all linked by our need as a nation and truly as a planet, for oil. Until we can truly be reborn to a community of sustainable energy needs, we need oil, and we will need oil from offshore rigs, and they will break, and there will be disastrous consequences.

Can we even comprehend and see what is happening to our precious Gulf and the shorelines of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and our dear Florida?

Will we be the people who destroy our planet?

Or will we be people who discover the gift of seeing and being seen?

Today is Pentecost. We had a lot of fun with fire and spirit, and people understanding each other while speaking different languages. We did this to remind ourselves that on Pentecost, the followers of Jesus, who were in disarray, discovered the power of the Holy Spirit in community.

They remembered the prophet Joel who proclaimed that the time will come where the young will dream dreams and the old will see visions. "Avatar" itself is a dream and a vision, put before us for the seeing.

In the week before Jesus dies, he tells his disciples that God will send Avatars to us, spiritual advocates, and the world will not see them or hear them because their hearts are locked and closed. But people of faith, like you and me, people who have had the experience of knowing that community is true, and our connection with the earth is real, and that good does overcome evil and love conquers hate, and that the blind truly do see, can receive spiritual guides when they come.

These avatars, spiritual advocates, holy guides are here among us now, in films like this, in wise people crying out that we cannot drill deep into the ocean floor without knowing how to correct mistakes that inevitably happen.

All manner of evil has been unleashed upon our world. We have always known this. Pandora's Box was opened long ago. But always still in that box, never lost, is hope.

If we leave this film, or this service, unchanged, walking or driving the same old road, then we are contributing to all that is being lost in world. If, however, we rise up with the same fervor that the Na'vi and Pandora's forest creatures summoned to live, advocate and work for the healing of our mother earth, if we take the road less travelled of advocacy and conservation for this world that is our home, then we too will have seen new truth again, and in so doing we will hear and see the spirit of God within and among us again, and we will live the ever renewing spirit of Pentecost, that the world may be saved.