

“Avatar vs. Baptismal Life,” Romans 6:1-4
Tom Johnson, January 15, 2010

Perhaps you’ve heard of the popularity of a recent film called ‘Avatar.’ I don’t want to spoil the movie for you, so all I’ll say is that Pandora is a beautiful, alien planet. I would say that its beauty is beyond description but, because of technology, the makers of the movie were able to generate computer images that make that world seem vividly real and believable.

My wife and I saw the movie in 3-D which makes it seem all the more ‘real.’ After the movie, we went home—not to the planet Pandora but to the third planet from the Sun—not to a tree but to a Chicago bungalow—not to the Na’vi people of Pandora but to eight earthlings—three young humanoids, a dog, two cats, and two fish—we went to sleep, not in a cocoon but in our Sealy Posturepedic. And were we OK with that—in fact, we were thankful.

However, some people had difficulty making the transition back to planet Earth. One person said the following in a news report on CNN:

“Ever since I went to see ‘Avatar’ I have been depressed. Watching the wonderful world of Pandora and all the Na’vi made me want to be one of them. I can’t stop thinking about all the things that happened in the film and all of the tears and shivers I got from it. I even contemplate suicide thinking that if I do it I will be rebirthed in a world similar to Pandora and that everything is the same as in ‘Avatar.’”

Another person said, “My depression [is] twofold: I was depressed because I really wanted to live in Pandora, which seemed like such a beautiful place, but I was also depressed and disgusted with the sight of our world, what we have done to Earth. I so much wanted to escape reality.”

What struck me about this “Post-Avatar Depression” is that people universally realize that we live in a fallen world—even without the help of fire breathing, venomous preachers like Pat Robertson. This world is not the Paradise God created it to be—so profoundly broken that even the earth’s crust shakes violently. Deep down within all of us is the recognition that we have been poor stewards of God’s creation and we have not loved one another as one world community ought to.

The other thing that struck me about this “Post-Avatar Depression” is that people yearn for Paradise—a perfect world of beauty, love, community, and meaning. And now, the only advice the world has to offer is that these “Na’vi wanna-be’s” need to get on with their lives. They need to live their lives as if paradise does not exist—that there will never come a day when they will have stronger, more beautiful bodies.

But I think this grieving over a broken world and yearning for paradise is a good thing. In fact, Paul’s question encourages us to live our lives in light of a reality greater than ourselves—“How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:3,4).

God baptizes and calls us to walk in newness of life—he calls us to be ambassadors of this heavenly kingdom so that the love, hope, and peace of the new world will break through to the broken world around us.

We walk in newness of life—and one day we will rebirthed into new bodies in Paradise. And God will bring us into a world that is truly beyond description. “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9; Isa 64:4). We will not need 3-D glasses for this one—but we will have new eyes and a new, perfect body.

Perhaps some day Hollywood will create a movie with computer generated images of St. John’s vision of heaven in Revelation. He describes a place with “the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb...also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit...for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever” (Rev 22:1-5).