

[Movie Poster] *Avatar* was released in 2009, and as of today, it is the highest grossing film of all time, having made nearly \$3 *billion* worldwide. No fewer than *four* sequels are in the works, so it's safe to say this film isn't going away any time soon. The film is basically a rehash of *Pocahontas* in space, with Native Americans replaced by the Na'vi, a giant blue cat-people, and Europeans replaced by a paramilitary mining company from Earth who's come for unobtainium (which is in the running for dumbest thing ever named in movies). The film's main character is Jake Sully, a combat veteran who was paralyzed in action. He's recruited and flown to the Na'vi planet - also unsubtly named Pandora, and he's shown a giant blue cat person who was grown from his DNA. This body will be his avatar, so he can live and work among the Na'vi. Jake ends up turning against the humans to fight with the Na'vi to save their planet.

There are probably about ten different themes we could explore in this film, but I want to focus on the one implied by the film's title - *Avatar* - and by the opening monologue of the film. If the film is trying to say anything, it's in there.

[Quote with pic of Jake] *Avatar* opens with Jake Sully saying, "When I was lying in the V.A. hospital with a big hole blown through the middle of my life, I started having these dreams of flying. I was free. But sooner or later, you always have to wake up." – Jake Sully, *Avatar*

Jake is disabled, and he longs for freedom. His body is broken, and he dreams of a new body. The miracle that is future technology literally enables this, giving him a new body that can run, leap and even fly on the Na'vi's weird dragon/bird things. There's never a question that Jake's avatar is really him. In the end of the film, after Jake has transferred his consciousness into his avatar forever, the Na'vi princess stands before him and says, "I see you." The implication is clear: Jake is free forever from his broken body. He will never again be trapped in brokenness....

But he is still the same person.

No wonder we resonate with the film! How many of us have ever felt that we're trapped in our bodies? Though issues of body image are normally associated with women, in the last decade or so, the playing field has leveled out so that nearly everyone today is dissatisfied with our bodies. They're the wrong shape, the wrong color, the wrong age. They smell bad, they break and break down. They get sick and tired.

[Jake body <-- soul --> avatar] And besides, everyone knows our bodies aren't the real us, right? The real us is our soul, our consciousness, that thing that exists somewhere inside us (our hearts, our brains?). It's that "real self" that transferred out of Jake Sully's broken human body into his Avatar. His body is a prison his Real Self is trapped in, and technology enables him to escape into a new, perfect body.

A lot of us wish we could do the same - design a more perfect version of ourselves, maybe one that's taller or thinner or stronger or curvier or lighter or darker, and then transfer the Real Us into that better body. It'd be *really* great if that body never got old or sick or worn down, too.

[Soul high, body low] There's a problem with this vision *Avatar* offers us, though. The film offers us a low view of our bodies, one that says they're not intrinsic to us. *Avatar* reinforces the belief that the "real us" is not this body through which we experience the world, but some ephemeral soul or consciousness. We've separated our Self from our Body and elevated our souls to the level of True Self.

A low view of our Bodies teaches us to hate our bodies. To treat them as accessories that can be swapped, discarded or modified as we see fit. We don't have to care what we put in them or what comes out of them because after all, what *really* matters is our True Selves trapped inside.

I say this is a problem not just because a low view of our bodies makes hating our bodies acceptable. This view of our bodies is profoundly unChristian. To separate our bodies from our souls, to elevate our souls as our True Selves, is actually a pagan understanding of our humanity. We inherited this division not from the Scriptures but from Greek philosophy.

We'll see today that the Scriptural understanding of our bodies is that they are good gifts from God, essential to who we are, and eternal in a way that matters to how we live in the here and now. We need to recover the high view of our bodies the Scriptures teach.

I know what you're thinking. When I was describing that low view of the body you didn't think for a second about Greek philosophy. The idea that our souls are our True Selves and our bodies are temporary sounds pretty Christian, doesn't it?

Our bodies get old, break down and die, and then what happens? Our SOULS go to heaven where they... well we're not sure. Something about turning into angels and getting harps and sitting on clouds singing, right?

[Picture of "Heaven"] It's actually not unlike *Avatar*. Our true selves leave our broken bodies behind and go to this amazing paradise where we can fly.

This is probably a picture of the Christian afterlife most of us grew up with - I know I did, and I could never figure out how playing harps and singing was supposed to be a good thing. I was always way more into punk rock.

I can't tell you how many funerals I've attended that celebrate that the person who has died is finally free of their broken, old, diseased body and is now walking with Jesus. And here's the thing: when someone you love suffers the weakness that is inherent in our bodies, you *want* that to be true. When you experience the weakness of your own body, you want that to be true. The promise of freedom from our bodies feels like good news.

And yet the Scriptures affirm again and again that God's plan for us is not to be disembodied souls floating on clouds. Our bodies are good gifts from God, and the fact of our embodied

existence has profound implications for how we live in the here and now *and* in the world to come.

[Scripture Slide] If you have a Bible, turn with me to 1 Corinthians 6. *Avatar* celebrates a low view of the body and high view of the Soul, and that is a very Greek perspective. Which is fortunate for us because the New Testament was written in Greek to an audience of Greek-speaking people, a people formed by Greek ideas.

[Bust of Plato with this idea illustrated] Greek philosophy was shaped profoundly by Plato. He taught that the whole material world is a shadow of the true, spiritual world. Everything material has a truer spiritual Form, an Ideal, and that includes humans. Our Souls are spiritual, our bodies are material. By the time of the New Testament, many of Plato's descendants taught that the whole material world, including our bodies, was evil. All that mattered was our souls, the spiritual that was part of the Real World. Sound familiar?

The Greek city of Corinth was shaped by these philosophies and teachings as much as anyone. And after the Apostle Paul brought the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection to them, they struggled to separate what it means to follow Jesus, to live in his new reality, from the old ways they were raised in.

They wondered (as we wonder), If our bodies don't matter - or if they're maybe even *evil*, then how can it matter who we have sex with? (Pagan Greek worship employed Temple prostitution, which several of the Corinthian Christians seem to still be practicing, and one man is apparently sleeping with either his mother or his step-mother!). They wonder (as we wonder), If our bodies don't matter, or if they're evil, then does it matter what or how we eat?

If our bodies are part of this material world and they'll be destroyed one day, does it actually matter what we do with them? It's a fair question, and one that our "Go-to-Heaven" theology doesn't have a good answer for.

So let's read what Paul says to the Corinthians, beginning in verse 12:

You say, "I am allowed to do anything"—but not everything is good for you. And even though "I am allowed to do anything," I must not become a slave to anything. You say, "Food was made for the stomach, and the stomach for food." (This is true, though someday God will do away with both of them.) But you can't say that our bodies were made for sexual immorality. They were made for the Lord, and the Lord cares about our bodies. And God will raise us from the dead by his power, just as he raised our Lord from the dead. -- 1 Corinthians 6:12-14

Our bodies weren't made for sexual immorality or gluttony or any other sin. Our bodies were made for God. God cares about our bodies. God *cares about our bodies*. God. Cares. About. Our Bodies. And what's more, according to Paul, our bodies are not temporary and disposable. God is going to raise our bodies from the dead *just as he raised our Lord from the dead*.

In other words, Paul believes our bodies are eternal. They're not accessories we will one day discard when we go to the Real World (by which we mean Heaven). Paul's perspective sounds strange to our Greek-shaped ears, but his perspective is very Hebrew. Since the beginning of the Bible, God's people have anticipated not a day when God is going to take us all away, but when God returns to reclaim the Earth from the powers of Sin and Death.

The End is not God takes us away, but the Return of the King, when God reunites Heaven and Earth and all God's people live together with God *here* in a physical world. (If you were here during our Revelation series after Easter, you will remember that we saw this was John's vision in the Revelation as well.)

And to live in a physical world, we need physical bodies.

For Paul, Jesus' resurrection is like a sneak peek of our coming resurrection. Jesus' resurrection was physical - he wasn't a ghost or spirit. He hugged people. He ate food. He walked on roads. And Paul says that *our* resurrection is going to be physical just like Jesus' was.

Our bodies matter. Our bodies are eternal. Our bodies are essential to who we are. Because Jesus was raised from the dead. Because we are going to be raised from the dead.

Which begs the question, "Well what do these resurrection bodies look like? Are they the same as what we have now, or different?"

If we think about resurrected bodies at all, we probably imagine idealized versions of ourselves. What do you want to look like? Well that's probably what you're going to look like - a better, stronger, taller (or shorter), thinner (or curvier?) version of you. But is that true?

How old will we be? Is there a magical age where our bodies are perfectly matured, but haven't started to decay yet that we'll be stuck at? We know that's not true. In fact, our bodies change throughout our whole lives, from the moment we're born to the moment we die. Will we have scars? What about someone like a Jake Sully, who's suffered a debilitating injury? Will his resurrection body be restored to his pre-injured state? What about someone *born* with a disability?

If we begin to ask these questions, we can see problems with this line of thinking. My body has shaped who I am. It's not a mere accessory: if I had been born female, I'd be a different person. Same if I'd been born Black, Hispanic, Asian or as a Native American. The experiences I have had because of and through my body have shaped me into the person I am.

Same with my ability. I'm not particularly athletic - never have been. What kind of person would I be if I had a body more naturally inclined toward athletics? If I were paraplegic, I'd be a different person - shaped by the different experiences I've had in my body.

Our bodies make us who we are. So what happens to those bodies in the resurrection? If the person we are here is congruent with the person we are in the Resurrection (and the Bible says again and again we are - even Jesus was recognized *as Jesus*, the same guy, by his followers), then to what degree do the bodies that shape who we are remain with us in the resurrection?

Is anyone's head hurting yet?

Great questions. Paul addresses this later in the letter, in chapter 15. Flip over there with me, and look beginning in verse 35:

Someone may ask, "How will the dead be raised? What kind of bodies will they have?" What a foolish question! When you put a seed into the ground, it doesn't grow into a plant unless it dies first. And what you put in the ground is not the plant that will grow, but only a bare seed of wheat or whatever you are planting. Then God gives it the new body he wants it to have. A different plant grows from each kind of seed...

It is the same way with the resurrection of the dead. Our earthly bodies are planted in the ground when we die, but they will be raised to live forever. Our bodies are buried in brokenness, but they will be raised in glory. They are buried in weakness, but they will be raised in strength. -- 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-43

[Side-by-side, seeds + Fruit] Paul jukes us. He says, think of it like seeds and fruit. You could never imagine what kind of fruit you'll get by looking at seeds. They have nothing in common. And the same is true of our resurrection bodies. Are they the same? Yes - so are fruits and seeds. But what is planted in the ground (the seed) is nothing like the fruit.

This is where I get frustrated. Paul, you told me that my body matters because it will be raised. But you can't tell me anything *helpful* about what that body is going to look like! Not cool!

If like me, you feel like this whole seed/fruit analogy is a bit of a cop-out, then take comfort. I imagine Paul laughing at us because we're missing the point of all this talk about the resurrection. Paul isn't interested in academic answers about the future. We'll figure all that out when we get there.

Paul reminds us of the truth of the resurrection to correct this low view of the body we have. He reminds us that the material world is not in fact evil, or an afterthought, but Plan A. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and God called it all *very good*. And in the End, God isn't going to take us away somewhere else. God is coming to reclaim this very good creation, to exile once and for all the forces of death and sin. And into that restored creation, we will be resurrected, body and all.

God cares about our bodies. Our bodies are good gifts from God. And that truth should change how we think about our bodies. How we understand what we do with them.

Learning to love our bodies is difficult. Learning to drown out the voices of our media that show us over and over what a desirable body looks like (so that we'll hate our own) takes time. Learning the (sometimes fine) line between enjoying what our bodies desire and indulging sin takes time and practice. (It's not always as obvious as 'Don't have sex with your mom.')

[Fasting & Feasting] Fortunately, the Church has practices that help us to learn to live as whole persons - mind, heart, spirit and body. They're twin practices: fasting and feasting. Fasting is how we learn to say No to desires that are not good for us. By fasting, we remember that life is not found in the things we desire, but in the one who gives us every good gift. If you have trouble saying No to what your body wants, if you've learned to indulge, then choosing to fast can be very helpful. Our Spiritual Practices guide has some great tips to get you started with fasting.

Many of us, however, have the opposite problem. We don't know how to enjoy our bodies, to say Yes to the joys of an embodied life. Feasting is the practice that helps us learn to love our bodies. When we feast, we indulge in the goodness of our bodies. We savor food, or the love of friends, or the touch of a lover. We celebrate how good it is that we have bodies to enjoy.

So maybe this week you need to say Yes to something, some pleasure you've denied yourself. Enjoy the body God gave you. Celebrate how this particular body has made you the person you are. (For my Parks n Rec fans, this is permission to Treat Yo Self!)

What would it look like for you to love the body God gave you? What would it look like if we were a people who embraced our bodies (literally, in some cases!) as good gifts from a God who loves us? How would that change how we treat ourselves, how we treat the world around us? What does it look like to celebrate our race, our gender, our height, our ability, as gifts from a God who is inviting us deeper into love and life and flourishing *because of the bodies we have*?

Our bodies are not avatars, my friends. The real you is the one you can see, taste, touch, hear and smell. This is the you God created and God called good. Your body is you. Your body is eternal. Love your body because God loves your body.

Communion SetUp

[Communion Slide] We see the twin practices of fasting and feasting in Jesus' own life, and nowhere more clearly than in his last day. The night before he was killed, Jesus celebrated the Passover meal with his followers. This is an annual feast celebrated when God delivered Israel from slavery and led them to freedom. They ate and drink to connect their bodies to the bodies of those freed slaves. But in that meal, Jesus transformed the meaning of the food. He broke

bread as his own body, broken for us. He passed a cup of wine as his very blood, poured out as a new relationship between God and humanity.

Jesus offered up his body, a precious gift from God, to be crucified for us. If his body were not good, then his death would be no sacrifice. But in this meal, in his death, he affirms for us the essential goodness of our bodies and of all creation. And he invites us into his death, to join with him in giving of ourselves to the world. We eat and drink today to join Jesus, to mourn the brokenness of our world, and to anticipate the day Jesus will return to reclaim this world and raise us all.

You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to receive this meal. If you are willing to receive your body as a good gift from God, and if you're willing to discover how the resurrection matters today, then you're welcome to come forward to receive this meal.