

## **“Blind Intersections”**

A Sermon based on Acts 16

First Presbyterian Church Kingwood

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I've got a question for you this morning. What do you get when you combine 14 years of dreaming with 4 years of filming and a budget of \$300 million dollars? Well, if you don't know, the answer is a movie called "Avatar."

It's already been seen in theatres by more people worldwide than any movie that's ever been made. And ten days ago, it was released on DVD. Sales and rentals are already off the charts, and in the next six months it's estimated the audience that's seen "Avatar" around the world will double or maybe even triple.

Movies make myths. They tell us stories that inspire our thinking and shape our souls. And because they do, we need to pay a lot of attention to Avatar because the story it tells isn't really new. It's actually very old.

I suppose all of you "Avatar" fans out there will remember the line that's spoken by Colonel Quaritch, when he first meets a group who've come to work for him. "Ladies and Gentlemen," he says, "you're not in Kansas anymore. You're on Pandora."

And that line's a clue, the first clue that there's more to the story of "Avatar" than meets your eyes. Although I have to admit what meets your eyes is truly spectacular. The movie won three Academy Awards; for art, cinematography and visual effects. But all that cutting-edge creativity, as one critic wrote, is really there to tell a simple story. And the story my friends is an old story. In fact it's an ancient story. It's the story of Pandora.

Nobody really knows where the story originated. What we do know though is that it was first written down by a man named Hesiod. He wrote it somewhere between the 8th and the 7th century BC. And it turns out in the ancient story, Pandora isn't a planet. It's a person, a woman. But stay with me for a minute and I think you'll see there's a connection between Hesiod and "Avatar."

You see in the ancient story Pandora is a woman created by Zeus. She's the first human woman and she's given to a man who's half god and half human; a Titan named Epimetheus. But it's not his name you need to remember, it's hers because Pandora in Greek means "all gifts."

It turns out to be a prophetic name because in the ancient myth about Pandora she is a woman who possesses every gift a woman would want: beauty, wisdom, strength, skill. So for a wedding gift because she already possesses "all gifts" herself Zeus gives her a large round container. Some of the sources call it a jar. Others call it a box. But whatever it is, it's closed. And Zeus' tells Pandora to keep the box closed because it's a box that meant to be seen not opened.

So Pandora's present is put on a shelf until the day when her curiosity can no longer be controlled. And she reaches out and opens the lid. (Now if you're following along with the movie script, at this point think about the strip mines the RDA uses to dig beneath the surface.)

Anyway, when Pandora opens the box, according to Hesiod, all of the evils that plague humanity rush out. "Countless plagues," he writes, "that wander among all men; for earth is full of evils." And in the movie, the mines that open up Pandora let loose countless plagues on a virgin planet, don't they?

But in the movie, there's a man named Jake Sully who finds a way to save Pandora. And it turns out it's the same thing Hesiod says Pandora found inside her box after all the evils had escaped. What was left in the box, says Hesiod, was something called hope.

What do you think about when you hear that word, hope? If I asked you to tell me this morning; if we could sit down and have a personal conversation right now, how would you define it? What does it mean for you? The *American Heritage Dictionary of English* says hope is "a belief in a positive outcome, a feeling" that something you desire can be had. And for most of us that probably gets pretty close. That's the definition of "hope" that we operate with.

It's certainly the definition of "hope" that "Avatar" operates with because in the movie Jake brings exactly that kind of "hope" to a group of people called the "Na' vi." He tells them that they can achieve the positive outcome they want. They can take back their planet. And they do. So at its core, "Avatar" is an affirmation of the kind of hope that can sometimes emerge from our best selves.

And it's that core message about hope and where it comes from that's being absorbed by audiences around the world. It's that kind of "hope" that we can change the world, any world that's been given out and it's that kind of "hope" that's being taken in. And people come away from "Avatar" saying as one movie-goer put it, "If only, if only we could find that kind of "hope" inside ourselves."

And honestly, that's a great message for a movie to give out. It is. It's an ancient message but it's a good message. It's as old as Hesiod and it's as new as "Avatar." And it's true. We can make changes in our lives and the lives of others with the kind of "hope" that unites people in working toward a positive outcome. It's the truth, but it's not the whole truth.

Because there are times when we need to discover a different kind of hope; a hope that comes from outside ourselves instead of inside ourselves. A hope that doesn't depend on our ability to work towards a positive outcome; individually or together. Because sometimes, sometimes there are circumstances that go beyond our ability to control.

"Due to circumstances beyond our control" that's the stock line we use. And we use it to recognize a simple reality, the reality there are times in life when things get out of control. "Due to circumstances beyond our control" a volcano erupts in Iceland. It disrupts air traffic around the world for almost a week. "Due to circumstances beyond our control" a drug-resistant bacteria erupts inside the body of someone and leaves him with only weeks to live.

Those are the stories. You know them. You read them just like me in the newspaper and on the internet. "Due to circumstances beyond our control" is a reality we all live with as human beings. And when we have to face into it, it can shake our hope down to the core, if our hope is simply a belief that we can create a positive outcome.

But there's another kind of hope, my friends, another dimension of hope beyond the hope we can find inside us when we are at our best. There's a hope beyond the hope we create by looking within and summoning up our inner resources. It's a hope that comes from outside. It's a hope that comes from God. For there are truly no circumstances, the Bible says, that are beyond His control.

There's a wonderful passage in the middle of a Book in the Bible that we rarely read. And we rarely read it for two reasons. The first is because it's in the Old Testament and the second is because it's a book that has a bad reputation. The

book is Jeremiah. And if you've heard anything about Jeremiah, you've probably heard it's a depressing book.

Actually it's not the book that's depressing, it's just the background of the book because Jeremiah's written in the middle of a bad situation. "Due to circumstances beyond his control" Jeremiah and his nation found themselves at a place where they don't know if there's any future for them, any way they can safely move forward.

It's called a blind intersection. You don't know if there's any way for you to safely move forward. But in that place, when he saw no way for himself or his people to move forward safely, Jeremiah turned to God. He turned to prayer. And part of the story of the Book of Jeremiah is the story of how God gave hope to Jeremiah, hope he couldn't find in himself. "I'm the Lord," God told him. "Is anything too hard for me?" And then God showed Jeremiah a future he could never have predicted.

And the same thing happened to Paul and Silas. "Due to circumstances beyond their control," they were at a blind intersection. They were sitting in an unlit inner cell in a jail in a foreign city called Philippi. They'd already been stripped and beaten with rods. Their feet had been fastened in stocks. They knew there was nowhere to turn. Trying to believe in a positive outcome they could produce wasn't going to work for them. So they prayed instead.

And over and over again, that's the story of the Bible. It's a story of people who find themselves at blind intersections. They don't know if there's any way they can safely turn. They can't turn to the kind of hope human beings can summon up from within themselves. So they turn to the kind of hope that human beings can ask for from a God who promises to save.

"If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and forgive their sin and heal their land." That's the promise. And it's God's promise, to be available to you and me at every blind intersection in our lives. It's God promise to be with us and give us hope; not the kind of hope we can find in ourselves but the kind of hope we can find in Him.

Now since I began this sermon by talking to you about one movie, let me end it by talking to you about another one. In 2004, during a special edition of *Primetime Live*, Diane Sawyer sat down with Mel Gibson to ask him some questions about an upcoming movie he had just finished making. It was called

*The Passion* and the questions that Diane wanted to ask Mel about the movie were tough ones. In fact, at one point the interview got very personal.

Gibson told Sawyer how filming the story of Christ had affected him. He told her how making the movie transformed him from a cultural Christian into a person who had put his whole hope in Jesus.

"I have to believe in him." Gibson said.

"You have to believe?" Sawyer replied.

"I have to" Mel said.

"Why?" Diane said.

And with a look that was more sincere than any he's ever given a camera Gibson said, "So I can hope. So I can live."

Do you have that kind of hope? Do you have a hope you can depend on? When you get to that place in our life when "due to circumstances beyond your control" you come to a blind intersection, do you have someone you can turn to?

If you don't know, if you aren't sure, let me give you some good news. God wants to offer you that kind of hope this morning. God wants to offer you a hope that goes beyond the kind of hope you can find in believing in a positive outcome. God wants to offer you the kind of hope that can only be found by believing in Him.