

*Good (Friday) Questions... "Are We So Bad?"*

*Luke 13:1-5*

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Like so many others, I went to Avatar, the movie blockbuster, and really enjoyed it. The computer-generated blue Na'Vi creatures and the incredible scenery are so real that you don't think about how it's not real; you think; it's just a movie filmed on the planet Pandora! The plot was thin; probably why this best-selling movie of all times didn't get "movie of the year."

But beyond the incredible imagery, something else was apparent in Avatar; Producer James Cameron presented pantheism as an attractive alternative to religions that claim that God transcends creation, and that sin separates humans from this transcendent, holy, God.

Pantheism is the ancient worldview that equates God with nature. "Pan" means "all." Pantheists believe that God is in "all." The Na'Vi live in harmony with nature, and when humans threaten them they are saved not only by the movie's hero, a turncoat Marine, they're also saved by their faith in Eywa, the "All Mother," the sum total of every living thing.

In an op-ed piece for the New York Times, Ross Douthat wrote, "If this narrative arc sounds familiar, that's because pantheism has been Hollywood's religion of choice for a generation now. It's the truth that Kevin Costner discovered when he went dancing with wolves. It's the metaphysic woven through Disney cartoons like "The Lion King" and "Pocahontas." And it's the dogma of George Lucas's Jedi, whose mystical force "surrounds us, penetrates us, and binds the galaxy together."

Hollywood keeps returning to these themes because millions of Americans respond favorably to them. From Deepak Chopra to Eckhart Tolle, the "religion and inspiration" section in your local bookstore is crowded with titles pushing a pantheistic message. A recent Pew Forum report on how Americans mix and match theology found that many self-professed Christians hold beliefs about the "spiritual energy" of trees and mountains that would fit right in among the indigo-tinted Na'Vi. (NYT, Dec. 21, 2009)

I'm not trying to stop you from watching these movies or Oprah's show; she does web-based seminars with Eckhart Tolle, the new age guru. I just want to start this Good (Friday) Questions series by acknowledging that if one is sympathetic to pantheism, the cross of Christ won't make much sense.

If divinity is interwoven in the universe, then people already have God within them, there is no separation between you and God, and you have no need for redemption. If God is within you, the way to pursue wellness is to stop thinking that there is a separation, and to focus on being attuned to the spiritual energy that is already within you.

The biblical perspective is that God pre-exists the universe and created it out of nothing. God transcends nature while delighting in it. Humans are mortal creatures, yet made in God's image for relationship, a relationship that God wants to last forever. God didn't want a separation, but it began when our ancestors rejected God's Lordship and insisted on their own way. By pushing God away, people set into motion a series of consequences, so that life on earth was no longer paradise. Since then it is our nature to

push God away. In the prayer of confession we used the words of Psalm 51, acknowledging “transgressions,” “iniquity,” and “sin.” In the psalmist’s words, “surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” We are in need of “cleaning,” “washing,” for God to “blot out all [our] iniquities.”

Jesus himself acknowledged that this separation from God brings death. Let’s look together now at Luke 13:1-5. He took issue with the notion that some people suffered more because God was getting them back for their sins.

*<sup>1</sup>Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup>Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? <sup>3</sup>I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. <sup>4</sup>Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup>I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."*

Jesus’ point is that sin ends in death for everyone. Unless we repent (in the original Greek - unless we go through *metanoia*), death will be the final word. *Metanoia* means the transformation of your heart and mind; human repentance because of God’s gracious activity.

Our salvation from death isn’t something we can do for ourselves. Jesus was very clear that the gulf between the holy God and sinful people was far too wide to span on our own efforts. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that it’s not only wrong to kill; it’s also a sin to hate. Not only wrong to commit adultery; it’s a sin to lust. Not only wrong to steal; it’s a sin to be greedy. Then he said,

*For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:20)*

The Pharisees were super-religious; Jesus was saying that if you put your hope in your own self-righteousness, you’re going to fall short. Even if someone is sincere, there’s no way to be religious enough, moral enough, spiritual enough, or generous enough to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. As the proverb warns, *there is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death. (14:12)*

The Gospel is bad news before its good news. The bad news is that we are mortal creatures, separated from God, and will die an eternal death. Not liking that bad news, many Americans decide not to believe it. They declare that there is no separation, that they are already divine, and don’t need saving. They reject the clear teaching of the Jewish scripture, the New Testament, even the red-letter words of Jesus. They also defy common sense. Even if one doesn’t believe scripture, isn’t it obvious that our behavior shows how separated we are—every hurt we inflict on ourselves and others is indisputable evidence that if there is a loving God, we resemble Him not!

The Gospel is bad news before its good news. But if you accept the Bible’s realistic assessment, you can also receive God’s amazing grace and incredible hope. As Paul wrote to the Romans:

*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (3:23-24, 6:23)*

The Gospel is bad news before its good news. If we stop denying the bad news, the better we can welcome Jesus and his salvation. That's when God comes close, God comes within. Admitting our need for rescue from death, believing that God has bridged the gap by sending Jesus to earth, trusting that when we welcome Jesus he cleanses us of sin, gives us his righteousness, and fills us with his Holy Spirit. And we seek to live in harmony with nature through the *metanoia*, the transformation of our hearts. And when we mortals die, through the gift of God we are resurrected into a life that will trump planet Pandora, in order to enjoy God forever.