

Avatar

Starring Sam Worthington, Sigourney Weaver

Directed by James Cameron

Rated PG

By Steve Norton

Rating: ****1/2 (out of 5)

Dances with Wolves. Pocahontas. Ferngully: The Last Rainforest. Even The Matrix.

By now, I'm sure that you've heard these stories among many others in the discussion as cynical comparisons to James Cameron's *Avatar*. If not, you've undoubtedly heard that the special effects (including new 3D technology) that comprise this film are going to change the way that filmmaking is done forever. (I had even heard that, if you don't see it in 3D, you might as well not see it at all...)

Although many of these claims are not unfair, the truth is that James Cameron's *Avatar* is much more than mere spectacle or stereotype.

Story wise, *Avatar* is set as the human race seeks to mine an invaluable resource from below the surface of the planet, Pandora. Here, they encounter an indigenous race, the Na'vi, who refuse to comply with their corporate plans. As a result, the 'Company' (a nod to Cameron's evil corporation in his 80s epic, *Aliens*) institutes 'the Avatar program', an initiative designed to create a diplomatic solution by 'downloading' a human's consciousness into the body of a Na'vi. When Jake Sully, a former marine with nothing to lose, is recruited to join the 'Avatar' program, he is sent to live amongst the Na'vi to gather military intel for a possible invasion. However, as Jake becomes increasingly involved in the Na'vi culture, he is forced to re-evaluate his perspectives and grapple with the moral implications of his military involvement.

The most interesting thing about *Avatar* though is that Cameron isn't satisfied with resting on the special effects of his technological masterpiece alone. Thematically, the movie wrestles with more serious topics ranging from the plight of imperialism to the destructiveness of capitalism. For our purposes, however, it is important to recognize some of the deeper theological issues that *Avatar* addresses. The Na'vi are deeply spiritual people, devout in their worship of Eywa, their deity devoted to keeping 'nature in balance'. The Na'vi care for nothing other than peace and connectedness with their planet and each other, a stark contrast to the destructive capitalist mindset of the 'Company'. What I found interesting was that, despite the obvious similarities of Na'vi theology to native spirituality, there are some connections with Christian theology. For example, the name Eywa bears a strong resemblance to the Jewish name for God, Yahweh. Further, there is even mention of the fact that, in order to really begin living one's life, they must be born a second time.

In fact, the film also has a strong missional theme of engagement as well. Jake's journey in his avatar is *extremely* incarnational as he (literally) steps into the Na'vi culture as one of their own. This transformation is an incredible representation of the tension of evangelical engagement. What is our motivation as we engage our communities? Is it to bring our agendas to the world and force them to change? Or, are we willing to humble ourselves, journey into the comfort zones of

others and listen to their stories before we speak? In *Avatar*, Jake takes the latter approach and, in doing so, develops such deep relationships with the indigenous people that he quickly becomes a part of their world. As a result, they trust him and are willing to listen to what he has to say. They view him as one of their own. (Incidentally, Jake becomes so ingrained into the Na'vi world that his superior officer, frustrated by the fact that his opportunity for conquest may be slipping away, snarls "You think you're one of them? Time to wake up.") As the church, it is our responsibility to engage our culture in this manner. As Jesus took on human form in an effort to reach us, so should we seek to lovingly reach our communities by establishing our place within it. This is not to say that we lose our identity as believers, but rather that we would begin to understand that we are called to be a foretaste of the Kingdom amongst the people of the world.

Cameron's *Avatar* appears to understand the importance of allowing the lives of others reach into our own. Themes of community, ecology and humility pervade this film, making it so much more than your typical blockbuster.

But, seriously, if you're going to see it, see it in 3D...