

## **Matthew's Gospel - 1/24/10 – Gen. 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Matt 4:1-11 – An Alternative Way of Living**

The movie *Avatar* is set in the year 2154 on Pandora, a moon in the Alpha Centauri star system. The RDA Corporation is mining Pandora's reserves of a precious mineral, called unobtainium. RDA also employs US Marines to provide protection and to subdue the Na'vi, the indigenous people of Pandora. The Na'vi enjoy what we might call Native American spirituality as they live in harmony with the ecosystem of their planet. While scientists have been able to grow Na'vi bodies modified with human DNA, the corporation wants this technology to control the Na'vi, not develop better relationships with them. This is a modern day parable of the temptation story and the clash between the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God.

The temptation story takes us to the crux of the Commandments and what it means to love God with our whole self and our neighbor as our self. Like Moses in his struggle with Pharaoh, Jesus wrestles with the devil. The devil tries to drive a wedge between Jesus and God. He does this by tempting Jesus to assert his independence from God by taking control and embracing values esteemed in the world rather than trusting in God's promises. Seizing the words spoken at Jesus' baptism, "You are my Son," the tempter proposes that Jesus use his power to satisfy his physical hunger. Like the earthquake victims in Haiti who were cut off from food and water for a week, Jesus was ravenous after fasting 40 days. Yet he knew that God was the one who provides for our needs. Rather than panic in the midst of scarcity, he trusted in God's sufficiency. As graphic scenes from Haiti have shown, people cut off from food and water easily disintegrate into panic and violence. Our first human instinct is survival. It's easy to be objective from where we sit. But in the midst of the crisis, would we be able to trust in God's provision? Part of the answer is to look at how we have responded. Have we provided support to organizations that bring God's provision of food, water and medical help? Are we praying for the Haitians and their recovery? The first temptation is about scarcity and hoarding in contrast to sufficiency and sharing.

The second temptation shifts to Jerusalem and the temple, both are places of power. The temple serves as a reminder of God's promise to protect. Yet around the temple stands the occupying Roman army, whose dominance and power is evident everywhere. The second temptation is about employing a public display of power to gain a popular following. Using Psalm 91, the devil encourages Jesus to play to the crowd by jumping and letting God's angels catch him. The question is about the proper use of power. Is power to be employed to manipulate, exploit and control, or to empower one another to serve God's purpose as we live together as equals? Will we use power like RDA to exploit the Na'vi or restore life and establish order as we're doing in Haiti? We have to fight our tendency to be first in line and #1 in our class if it comes at the expense of others. The kingdom of God is about empowerment while the kingdom of the world is about domination.

The third temptation shifts to a very high mountain. From Mt. Nebo Moses had seen all the land that the Lord would give to the people of Israel. Now Jesus, the new Moses, sees all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. The temptation is to worship or put his trust in something or someone other than God. In this case it means trusting in earthly power and becoming king over this vast realm without suffering. The question is this: in whom or what do we place our trust? Is it in God, even if God's way leads us to enter into the lives of hurting, hungry, homeless people; people who have been broken by life? Or do we trust in our economic and political systems that provide our security and often prevent us from serving the less fortunate and needy ones.

Matthew's image of Jesus is that of a new Moses, the great teacher of the faith who invites us into an alternative way of living. Through words and deeds, Jesus shows us a community and kingdom founded on different principles than that of the world we live in. It's a kingdom where we pray to God for daily bread but realize that provision is dependent upon our sharing with each other so that everyone has enough; a kingdom where we pray for forgiveness realizing how withholding forgiveness is a misuse of power; a kingdom where we ascribe all power to God and seek to live under God's gentle rule of mercy and justice as we empower each other.

We do not live on Pandora, but on planet earth. Each day our baptismal identity is challenged: "If you are a child of God, if Jesus is Lord, then ..." How do Jesus' responses to temptation help us think about our own responses and the way in which we live in the world? Faith is an ever deepening trust in God's presence and power. The way of the kingdom leads us to live in oneness with God, each other and the whole creation.

