



“On a Mission From God”

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Isaiah 6:1–8***

How many of you here this morning have heard about the movie *Avatar*? How many of you here this morning have seen *Avatar*? How about seen it more than once? I’ve seen it—in fact I made Tom, Sage, and Maya see it again because I was on a business trip when they saw it the first time and they loved it so much, I just had to see what all the hype was about for myself. And I’ll admit it, to echo the words of Sage and Maya: I was “blown away.”

Well, apparently my family is not alone in finding this a pretty extraordinary example of movie making—it’s the biggest money maker of all time—and in fact, it surpassed *Titanic* (the previous record holder) not just in dollars, but it became #1 in record speed, becoming the fastest movie to break the \$1B mark, and it’s kept the pace ever since. It’s currently the #1 film world-wide—and looks to stay that way for some time.

In some ways, there’s really nothing like it—it’s a whole new approach to integrating technology with human actors and it’s a dazzling visual spectacle—especially in IMAX with 3-D glasses.

But, in another way, it’s a story that is as ancient as human society, as old as story itself. It’s the classic “hero’s journey.” The well-known American scholar in comparative mythology and comparative religion, Joseph Campbell, who is best known for his book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* and the PBS documentary about his work, talked about this as the archetype story—so much so, he coined the term “monomyth,” essentially saying that this is the story at the deep, deep center of human culture.

In the “hero’s journey” as described by Joseph Campbell, the hero is a citizen of the ordinary world—and usually a flawed one at that. In the midst of everyday life, she or he receives a call to adventure, or to fulfill a special mission. Usually there is a reluctance—a “why me?” moment—but inevitably the hero is pulled to

enter the unknown world and at some point the question changes from “why me?” to “why not me?”—and assignment is accepted.

The hero who accepts the call finds they must leave the known limits of his or her world and enter a strange new world, with new rules, new customs, and often, new powers and new dangers. She or he must face tasks and trials, sometimes alone and sometimes with assistance. In the most intense versions of the narrative, the hero must survive a life-threatening challenge.

In the midst of these trials, the hero encounters a powerful, life-giving, loving life force—often in a Goddess or God form. Often this encounter brings a spiritual awakening or restoration, shifting the hero’s purpose from self to other, from survival to sacrifice. In this awakening, the hero attains a great gift—sometimes this is a physical healing, but more often it is a spiritual healing and life transforming insight. At this point, the hero must then decide what to do with this great gift—will he go back to the world and use the great gift for good or will he squander the gift for selfish gain? If the hero does decide to use the gift for good, he or she often faces challenges on the return journey—sometimes even battles that literally pit good against evil, and life versus death.

It’s in these battles that the hero’s true nature is revealed—as a messenger from God, or sometimes, even as God incarnate. In the final phase, the hero is shown to be the master of two worlds—usually both the spiritual and material worlds and now lives a life free of the fear of death and embodying love and goodness.

So what do you think, all of you who have seen *Avatar*? Did James Cameron the writer and director follow this archetypal script or what?

Indeed, these stories are very, very deep in human culture—and every few years, a new version of this myth gets played out. For all of you who haven’t seen *Avatar*, we’ve got lots and lots of other examples we can point to. For example, ancient stories like Osiris, Prometheus, and the story of the Buddha follow this pattern. The stories of Moses, and even Jesus Christ, follow this structure closely. In more modern times, L. Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz*, C.S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, and George Lucas’ *Star Wars* movies all echo this archetype. Even a totally human story like Kevin Costner’s *Dances With Wolves* follows this essential plotline.

We even see this myth applied to nonfictional human figures—if not literally, then in the ways we tell their stories to ourselves. Some have observed the “hero’s journey” narrative in the life of Mahatma Gandhi, others in the life of Martin Luther King. Some point to John Paul XXIII, others to Nelson Mandela. I might even observe that some of the somewhat irrational expectations of Barack Obama seem to indicate that some may be projecting a version of the “hero’s

journey” on to our President—whether they see him as a supernatural force for good or a demon.

So with that in mind, listen again to the passage from Isaiah:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: ‘Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!’

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.’ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’

It’s pretty easy to see what George Lucas or James Cameron could do if they put this passage on the big screen—and in fact, in a very real way, they already have.

So if this story is so familiar, why does it “hook us” so deeply? Why do we keep coming to see it re-enacted, why do we pay others to remind us of it?

I think there are four big messages in these stories that keep us coming back for more:

- First, these stories speak to something most of us know and feel at a very instinctive level: we are meant to have purpose in our lives. Something deeper than just the surface level facts of our lives is humming inside us. Despite our ordinariness, we are called to something higher.
- Second, I think these stories remind us of what it takes to connect with and live out of that higher purpose: namely courage—a word that comes from Latin and later the French word “couer” meaning “heart”—that is to

say the bravery that comes from the heart, in other words from love; and, compassion—a word that literally means “to suffer with”—in other words a deep empathy that takes us out of spectator mode and onto the “playing field” alongside those we have empathy for.

- Third, these stories show us that most often the enemy of the good doesn’t enter the scene as the devil himself, and usually doesn’t look like evil at all at first. Evil—the “dark side” as George Lucas talked about it—first shows up as expediency, a quest for personal power, complacency, bureaucracy, resignation, and a lack of empathy.
- And fourth, is the meta message, and that is that the story—our stories—truly matter. Our stories have enormous power to shape our reality, to create meaning, to motivate feeling, to see new insight, to provoke action.

There’s a book that I use quite a bit in my professional life called “The Power of Story” by a fellow named Jim Loehr. The subtitle is “Rewrite Your Destiny In Business and in Life”—a pretty big promise for a relatively small book, if you ask me.

But, I have to say, I think the guy is onto something. He’s spent a lot of his professional life working with pro athletes—people with enormous physical talent, mental toughness, and ambition. And he’s found that in any sport, there may be many possible Kobe Bryants, or Tim Lincecums, Albert Pujols, Michael Phelps, or Serena and Venus Williams—who truly have gifts that make them the one in a million, but that even those extraordinary talents can be dimmed by a phenomenon he calls “the story we tell ourselves about ourselves.”

He found that even people with extraordinary gifts like professional athletes couldn’t access those gifts fully with a personal story that substitutes personal ambition for purpose, that puts pride as premise, that puts winning as the ultimate measure for success, that assumes admiration and love are the same. Through this insight, he coached many top athletes to change the “story they tell themselves”—not at a superficial level, but to create a story that taps deeply into the core purpose of their lives and how their achievement in their sport aligned to that purpose. And, lo and behold, both their performance on the field, pool, or court improved—but even more importantly, their resilience, dedication, meaning, satisfaction and joy in doing their sport, their overall joy and satisfaction in their lives, and their relationships with others all improved significantly.

So, he figured if it works for professional athletes, what about the rest of us? Now he spends his time coaching business people and others about how to change their stories. He starts with asking people to write down their life story in just a few sentences. Once that’s down on paper he asks people to write what they’d want on their tombstone or obituary and compare that to the story they wrote. And guess what—a lot of people realize very quickly that the story they are telling

themselves about themselves every day is not at all aligned to how they'd want to be remembered—something much closer to our core purpose in life. So he helps people re-write their stories—not ignoring reality but reframing it in a higher purpose. And, just like professional athletes, his clients—people like us—find that their resilience, dedication, meaning, satisfaction and joy in living their life, and their relationships improves greatly.

But, what about when life is challenging, unfair, and painful? That gives us a pass right? I mean no one expects heroics out of everyone. Well actually, it's when the hard stuff happens that the story we tell ourselves about ourselves becomes even more important.

One of my best friends in college is a guy named Barry. We became even closer after we graduated and I was still in Anderson in Seminary and he was working in the admission office at the College. At that time, we were still back in Anderson as our peers had moved on. He had a younger sister still in college and Becky and I became very close too—in fact, the whole family became a sort of second family for me. I spent a lot of weekends at their home in Ohio, I was in Becky's wedding, and Barry and I spent a lot of time together trying to figure out what was our true calling or if staying in Anderson was just some kind of postponement of getting to our “real life.”

I always knew Barry had a very special place in his heart for Dana—she and I were not close friends, but we had been dorm-mates in our sophomore year, and we had a lot of common friends and hung out in the same group on campus. She was a beautiful girl—and she had a sort of angelic quality—she even played the harp, and did so beautifully.

Over the next ten years, Barry maintained a close friendship with Dana even as she swore her intention was for the relationship to stay “just friends.” And over the years, as his love for her grew, so did his pain that his feelings for her were not mutual. He became a youth pastor and a writer, went to seminary, and vacillated between confessing his true love and cutting off the relationship and moving on.

And then, as sometimes happens, the time was right, something sparked, and within a very short time, they were married—and joyously so. And then, within just a few short years, Dana was diagnosed with breast cancer, and then a relapse, and then last September, a final relapse. She died December 23rd.

So what's the story of his life that Barry will choose to tell? Is it the story of unrequited love that was taken away almost as soon as it bloomed? Is it the angry man shaking his fist at God for the unfairness of it all? Is it the numbing resignation and powerlessness of grief? Is it “do the manly thing” and pick yourself up by your boot straps and move on?

Listen to Barry's own words from a recent blog entry:

I've always been intrigued (or impressed, or curious) about a particular element in the training and philosophy of the military regarding combat. It goes like this: When you hear or see enemy fire, you run toward the fire. This counterintuitive approach is incredibly brave and inspiring to me and it's a philosophy I'm attempting to live by as I face my own enemy fire of grief—run toward the pain and embrace it. I found myself in a coffee shop last week with a U.S. Marine. When I saw this soldier it crossed my mind that if I'm going to base my entire approach to grief on this military philosophy, I should confirm that this is indeed a real philosophy. So I invited him over to my table and asked if I could ask him a military question. He replied "yes sir" and stood in his "at ease" posture. I asked him about the "run toward the fire" approach. He confirmed that it was "absolutely" a building block in combat training, and added: "When you hear enemy fire, if you turn and run, it won't get any easier. In fact, it will only get harder if you don't run toward the fire."

That's all I needed.

And with that, that is what I'm attempting to do. When I know something will bring pain, or hurt, or cause me to cry, I will not avoid it. I will embrace it. I will embrace the pain, which will in turn, remind me of the beauty.

At least today, I say that.

This doesn't mean that I'm cleaning out closets (unless it's my own; I do find myself obsessed with organization these days, which is helping to fill my task-oriented brain with...well, tasks) or looking at scrapbooks every night. But it does mean that I will go on a ski trip in late February to Big Mountain in Montana—a trip that Dana and I had planned to do together. And I will do the moonlight ski that week (a full-moon activity on Big Mountain) with some of the greatest friends in the world. Dana did the moonlight ski a couple years ago on a girl's (Flamingo!) retreat and has wanted to take me ever since.

I will run toward and embrace the pain.

And I will read my Bible. I will ski in and hike through mountains. I will smell lilacs in the spring. I will walk on the beach. I will cry. I will let it hurt. I'm learning that the pain of loss is directly proportional to the beauty of the relationship. That means I have a lot of pain to go. And I can resolutely say, it's worth it.

Running toward the fire,

Barry

So what's the story you are telling yourself this morning? Are you running toward your core purpose in life? Are you running toward the fire in your life or are you running away from the fire? Or maybe you are just standing still, paralyzed in fear, or distracted, or tired, or busy, or depressed, or sick, or hurting? What's the story you are telling yourself about your situation? If you are stuck, it's time to rewrite your story. Let the archetype of the hero's journey help you do the re-write. Remember the four big messages:

- There is a purpose to your life. God has called you—uniquely you into this moment and time and place. What is your purpose? What is your mission?
- Connecting with and staying aligned to your purpose takes compassion—the ability to see and have deep empathy for others—and courage—from the Latin root that means “heart”—cœur in French—the strength beyond understanding that comes from love.
- Know that the “dark side” shows up most frequently in resignation, apathy, powerlessness. Yes, sometimes the evil one is personified in a person or event—our world definitely has examples of despots and dictators—but it is always through our complacency that the dark side is given reign.
- The story you tell yourself matters. Whether you're struggling to make friends in high school, struggling to make ends meet, struggling to believe in yourself, or struggling to find meaning—telling yourself a story that equates purpose with ambition, achievement, or even survival may get you through the day, but it will not give you the resilience, dedication, meaning, satisfaction and joy that you seek.

God has issued the invitation through your very presence in this time and place: Will you see your life as a mission from God? Through God's grace given us in Jesus, who showed us with his own life—his own “hero's journey”—how to live out a story of meaning, resilience, dedication, purpose and joy, and who is our comforter and companion in every trial and tribulation, through grace, we can each answer: Here I am, send me.

So what's your story?