

Matthew 24:36-44

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"But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

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Matthew 24:36-44 like many other eschatological texts has been subject to one of the most interesting ideas developed in the last 30 years in pop culture, the rapture. The movies that have been filmed based on this idea and book series have come out are always interesting to see. Because it is interesting to see how people respond to the idea of people just vanishing into thin air. It is also fun to see how people have used the "rapture" as a way to come up with funny bumper sticker ideas, like "Honk if I can have your car when the rapture happens" or "Beware, this car will be without a driver if the rapture happens." But although watching Nicolas Cage movies about the rapture sounds fun, as a seminary student preaching his first real sermon I felt I had to go beyond just preaching on a movie, and so I had to read commentary, after commentary, after commentary, after commentary in order to figure out the ways in which this text speaks to me, to figure out the ways in which God might be calling me to speak faithfully about this text. So lucky for me and for you. I am not going to talk about the rapture shown in pop culture or movies but a different kind of rapture, one that happens today, the one that happened yesterday, and the one that will happen tomorrow.

And so many commentaries later, I finally found something that caught my attention, and it wasn't specific interpretation, or a deep theological thought, but an image, a picture painted by one of the commentators. The picture of Jesus sitting with his disciples on the Mount of Olives, looking out to the temple and just behind the temple, the rest of the city of Jerusalem. And as they are sitting down with this view in front of their eyes, they are asking Jesus when? When will the temple be destroyed, when will persecution start, and most importantly when will the son of man come? The disciples were eager to know how they could tell when the son of man was coming. But I think this image of this group of friends looking out to the temple and the city takes importance in Jesus' words. See Jesus tells them that the son of man is coming and when he does it will be at an unexpected time. And I don't know what the exact reaction of the disciples was when Jesus said these words, but I can imagine that they all looked in the direction of the temple and the city, maybe memories flooded their minds about the times they had visited the temple, or the times they had drank and eaten together at someone's house, or maybe some of them simply pictured themselves walking down the streets. Jesus tells them that the son of man will come when they're doing the simplest of things. He is coming back when you are eating and drinking, and celebrating, he's coming back when you are out in the field. He is coming back when you're preparing a meal. He is coming when you expect him the least. So, Jesus tells them to be watchful, to be on the alert because he is coming.

This summer was one of my busiest summers ever, and the reason was none other than my 6-week intense Greek class, I was sleeping, eating, and drinking in Greek for 6 straight weeks. And this semester one of my classes is Luke exegesis class, which is also Greek based. So I have been exposed to Greek for almost 6 months now, and I gotta accept that these classes were giving me headaches at first but now I know that the headaches have a purpose. And so as I was translating this text I came across the word παραλαμβάνεται PARALAMBANETAI from the root word παραλαμβάνω PARALAMBANO. This word is used to describe the action of being taken, so when Jesus says that one will be left and the other will be taken, this is the word that's being used. And in searching through my lexicon, and some other translation tools I discovered that παραλαμβάνω PARALAMBANO has a deeper meaning in some of the translations. This meaning came from

one of the variations of translation that really captured me, it was this word being translated as "being taken to oneself." In other words, παραλαμβάνω PARALAMBANO is not only to be taken, but to be taken to oneself. The breakdown of this word made me question so many things about this text. But using this translation sheds light on the fact that people are not being taken to a place like we see in movies, but to a person, a figure, a certain someone that takes you to themselves. And this figure is no other than the Son of man according to Jesus.

What does it mean to be taken to oneself, what does it mean to be taken to the Son of Man?

As the holidays approach it seems like a lot of us want to be ready to receive Jesus, as we enter this season of Advent we make preparations to make sure everything is perfect for that Christmas dinner, for that Christmas service, and for that Christmas morning. It is a long-awaited and expected time that we work hard to make it look and feel the best for those around us. We want to receive Jesus with love with joy and it seems like the only way to do that is by having a perfect Christmas day. In this way we are a lot like the disciples, they were asking Jesus how they could be ready for his coming, and they needed to know the signs so they could prepare for that day. But Jesus simply tells them that he is coming back at an unexpected time, he tells them that they will be taken to him when they are preparing a meal, when they're at work, when they're doing the banalest of things.

The obvious question comes up how can we expect the unexpected? On the one hand, we know how many days we have until Christmas is here, we are buying all the presents for our loved ones, we are planning Christmas dinner, and decorating the house, maybe buying plane tickets, all at the same time. And on the other hand, we have Jesus himself telling us he's coming at an unexpected time. Christmas is anything but unexpected.

Christmas of 2020 was the first time I celebrated the holidays away from my family. For the past seven years that I had been away from home I had always flown to Tabasco, Mexico to celebrate Christmas and New Years with my family. But 2020, believe it or not just felt like the right time to celebrate Christmas with my partner, Jasmine. After being together for 2 years I felt like it was finally time for us to celebrate the holidays with her family. This was totally unknown terrain for me, I had a vague idea of how they celebrated but it was still a bit terrifying. And so for a couple of weeks, I was trying to remember what Jasmine had told me about how her family celebrated the Holidays. And I took her with me gift shopping for her entire family so I could get everything right and perfect. And I was constantly offering to help in anything I could help with around the house. I wanted the first holidays with my future in-laws to be special, so I spent a lot of time preparing for that Christmas eve dinner. I was wrapping what I thought were perfect handpicked gifts for them. I was honestly just quite nervous, in the past years I had never worried so much about the Holidays as I did in 2020. But also, I was thinking about my family back home, and thinking whether they missed me as much as I missed them and whether they were having fun without me. It was just a lot going on. But that Christmas was different not because I was without my family or because I got to spend it with Jasmine but because I was so worried expecting that day, I was anxious to see if all the work would pay off on that day. And I ignored the daily and I forgot to be open to the unexpected, I forgot that the holidays were about receiving Jesus in the daily. I saw all the planning as a means to an end, all the hard work as the steps to receive Jesus. When Jesus was with me in the planning, he was with me in the banality of my own day. He was with me in the daily tasks.

Coming back to our first image of Jesus and the disciples at the Mount of Olives I can't help but think that the disciples were looking out to the city trying to calculate where they would be when Jesus came. Such is the nature of their question, they would like to be prepared for that moment. But Jesus simply tells them to be watchful, to be alert, in their daily lives. When we try to calculate the precise moment in which a holiday will happen we are in danger of missing Jesus in the daily. We are in danger of missing being taken up in the divine in our daily tasks, we are missing παραλαμβάνει PARALAMBANO.

The disciples were asking the wrong question, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" But Jesus gives them the right answer anyways, he says "Keep awake" and "be ready." He commands them to contemplate life, to be open to the coming of the son of man, because the divine is present in the daily, not only in the holidays. It was hard for the disciples to hear uncertain words but Jesus knew that only those who renounced the knowledge of the time and who reckoned constantly with God's intervention without trying to be in control could be awake to experiencing the divine in our daily lives." Only those who are able to walk into work, into the mall, into the kitchen, into the airport with open eyes can experience PARALAMBANO, being taken up to the son of man.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

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