

# The Grace of Subtraction

a Sermon for Advent 1A, Matthew 24:36-44

by Sam Persons Parkes

“I’ve been robbed,” said Paolo Letizia of Palermo, Italy to the police.

Seven rooms of furniture, paintings, decorations, all gone.

Even his clothes. Raptured.

The blue cat, however, was left behind.

Needless to say, Mr. Letizia was devastated.

After all, this amounted to \$140.00

See, the burgled house of Paolo is a virtual residence in a Facebook App.

Some hacker cracked his Facebook password

and absconded with all his digital belongings

and he actually filed a report with the real Palermo police.

“I don’t think it matters that the apartment only exists in Facebook,”

he said to the newspapers.

“It is real to me and I have suffered a real loss.”

I am sure that Matthew’s church suffered the absence of Jesus as a real loss.

But I wonder whether you could say the same of Jesus’ return?

It might seem from the text

that the Matthew’s church was riveted

to keep up with Jesus’ immanent return,

but the fact is that you don’t have to exhort the truly interested

to stay awake.

Already in these few decades after Jesus’ death,

the church begins to yawn and stretch at the notion of Jesus’ return.

Matthew’s church was losing interest in the end, the eschaton.

So Matthew remembers Jesus “upping” the ante

with some clear thoughts on judgment.

“You will want to avoid the stunning surprise

because remember that people were going about their regular business  
eating and drinking

when – SHAZAM! – the FLOOD came and swept away the wicked.”

Still, this rhetoric works best among those who are tired of fasting,

The daughters who have their bridesmaid dresses picked out,

and are ready to set a date and move on.

The images of one being taken and one being left might have scared us a bit,  
But it's hard to tell which is which.

Is it better to be taken or left?

See? The text isn't clear.

But even if it were more clear,

it doesn't mean that Matthew's church would really believe it.

They have been waiting for it for awhile.

The eschaton seems to be more virtual than real,

more 1s and 0s and pixels of narrative light

than something solid and trustworthy.

If this text is trying to function like spiritual caffeine and Visine in Matthew's church,

My God, what sort of sleep deprivation chamber must we need?

Electric shocks? Cattle prod?

We simply don't believe this,

that the eschaton will come in judgment

to sweep half of us away.

We believe our house is secure.

We are prepared to fight a "home invasion"

By "standing our ground."

Well, not entirely, I guess, since much of our culture believes that

God can get in through the chimney. With presents!

Okay, if not God, then the world's most prominent saint!

Maybe we don't think Santa is God.

But don't we often think of God in Santa-ly terms?

Benign? Kind? Giving? Have a coke and a smile!

God augments our life. Adds to it.

God is the ultimate package under the tree.

All gift. And we unwrap it.

And, ah, look! It's God. It's just what we wanted.

God for the person who has everything.

It's skipping chapters 25-27,

the passion, the crucifixion.

And arriving at Lo, I am with you always

even to the end of the age.  
God is the ultimate accessory to our consumer lives.

Christmas has little patience with and often tries to silence  
those who have lost things,  
who live Matthew 27 lives.

The closer we get to Christmas the less convenient it is in our culture  
for you to experience loss,  
for you not to play along with the Christmas game.

Everyone wants the gold, frankincense and myrrh,  
but no long journeys to the manger, plz.

And for some that journey is a lot longer and more difficult.

Some of us are challenged by people who are no longer with us,  
family and friends that we have lost.

Some of us are challenged by people who won't seem to go away,  
our abusers and critics.

Between Thanksgiving and Christmas rates of alcohol abuse,  
drug overdose,  
compulsive overeating,  
and domestic violence shoot up.

But who really notices?

In the US we're too busy spending \$655 billion December dollars,  
an average of 936 dollars per consumer this year.

But aren't all of these the symptoms of the same disease?

The disease of MORE, MORE, MORE?

More buzz, more food, more stuff to numb out with?

To cover over the marriage that isn't working well?

To show our friends and neighbors that we can afford what they do,  
when often we cannot.

Most of the time we don't really believe that Christ's eschaton is real.

Like Matthew's church we have waited so long.

And, for some, it's hard to believe that,

even if he did return,

he could steal much more from us than we have already lost.

These Matthew 24 images of the eschaton as a loss.  
as judgment against us are simply not real enough for us to keep watch.  
Because we wonder, perhaps,  
Is anyone really watching US?  
Maybe the best Advent thing to do is wrap up tight,  
drink our toddies and head to bed.  
Get as numb as we can get to the losses of life.

But someone IS watching, isn't he?  
Out beyond the shining Christmas tinsel  
in the Advent-purple shadows,  
You know the sound of crunching leaves and twigs  
that the footfalls of Jesus make.  
Jesus IS coming!  
Matthew caught sight of him  
looking for a way into our assumptions about what God wants with us.  
He doesn't need the chimney.  
He is a thief.  
He can pick the lock.

Apparently we have something that Jesus wants,  
and he is seeking out the unlocked window,  
the weak point of entry.  
He comes out of the Advent shadows to offer us  
not one more gift under the tree.  
He comes to offer us the grace of subtraction.

Jesus uses this logic throughout the gospel.  
Someone takes your coat? Give the shirt, too  
Give to everyone who begs.  
I will take your love  
and give it to your enemies.  
If you want to keep your life, lose it into my hand.  
Take what you have and sell it and give it to the poor  
and deny yourself  
and take up the cross and follow me.  
Jesus takes things from us and calls it grace.

To be sure, not every loss is grace.  
But in some losses a little sort of thing happens.

This is the way spiritual disciplines often work.  
Jesus wants our money,  
we say, okay, take the money.  
And there's this thing that happens,  
    a lightening of the load,  
        a sharing of the responsibility,  
            a redistribution of the goods,  
                a loosening of the yoke of currency.

Jesus wants the food, and we say, okay, take the food.  
    So we fast.  
We become poorer, hungrier.  
And then the thing happens.  
We identify with someone who is hungry but not by choice.  
    And we are moved to act!  
Grace by subtraction.

And we lose enough to become thirsty, hungry for presence of the Thief.  
We come to love the Thief.  
We want Jesus to come back  
    and take away something else.  
We don't know when it will happen, what the time might be.

It might be this afternoon, we were planning to decorate the tree today.  
The Thief comes and lovingly holds one of your hours hostage.  
If you ever want to see this hour again, you'd better pray.  
When was the last time you spent an hour praying? Half an hour?  
It feels like loss. Like underwear on Christmas morning.  
We forget how good it is to have underwear.  
Grace by subtraction.  
He comes only to threaten the things that threaten us,  
    to inoculate us against the Disease of More,  
        to take away what is dead or deadly.

And one day we remember who the Thief was.  
We were working together in the vineyard with him  
and he was taken  
and we were left.  
He was the one drowned in the waters of judgment that belonged to us.  
It was a real loss. It was death on a cross.

But then the lock on that tomb was picked.  
The eyewitnesses said it was more than 1s and 0s.  
Not just a virtual resurrection.  
You could touch him.

And then he left again. Ascended! Grace by subtraction?  
Yes. He left somewhere so that he could be anywhere.  
Loose! Like a thief! Like a ninja!

THAT'S where the second coming really began!  
Right back there at the Resurrection.  
Because the Resurrection means more than Jesus is alive;  
it means Jesus is a-loose  
to plunder the strong one's house.  
It means the death of death.  
Sure, the Chamber of Commerce would LOVE  
to hold that second coming off to the end of things.  
So that no bottom-lines will be threatened.  
But Jesus won't have it.  
Instead he takes the balaclava  
and heads into the dark night of our losses,  
marking all the graves he will one day deeply plunder.  
Jesus steals what is dead and deadly.  
Grace by subtraction.  
With empty tombs.  
And ascensions.

But with the potential to come again anywhere, anytime  
even to the places where we have lost a lot,  
to our memories and to our grief.

One of these days and it won't be long now,  
the Thief is sure to visit us for the last time,  
the Thief we love,  
the one who has caused us a thousand little deaths  
and redeemed them all.

And we will lose again.  
like falling in love is a loss.  
Like nurturing a child is loss.  
My God, what did you do with your time  
before the child came?  
It's like that pre-parent person doesn't even exist.  
You don't even remember.  
The gift was so good, that you lost the loss.