



## **The Art of Pulling Threads**

A Sermon for Northminster Church

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Isaiah 7:1-17

In the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, the king of Israel came up to Jerusalem to wage war against it, but they could not conquer it. When the house of David was told, "Syria is in league with Ephraim," his heart and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.

So, the Lord said to Isaiah, "Go forth to meet Ahaz and say to him, 'Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, because they say, "Let us go up against Judah and terrify it, and let us conquer it for ourselves."'

Thus, says the Lord God:

"It shall not stand,  
and it shall not come to pass,  
and if you will not believe,  
surely you shall not be established.'"

Again, the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, "Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven."

But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.

Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign:

Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil

and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

“But beware. In those days, the Lord will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father’s house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah – the Lord will bring upon you the king of Assyria.”

#### Matthew 1:18-25

This is how the birth of Jesus came about:

When Jesus’ mother, Mary, was engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her husband, an upright person unwilling to disgrace her, decided to divorce her quietly.

This was Joseph’s intention when suddenly the angel of God appeared in a dream and said, “Joseph, heir to the House of David, don’t be afraid to wed Mary; it is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived this child. She is to have a son, and you are to name him Jesus—‘Our God Saves’—because he will save the people from their sins.”

All this happened to fulfill what God has said through the prophet:

“The virgin will be with child  
and give birth,  
and the child will be named  
Immanuel” —a name that means “God is with us.”

When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of God had directed, and they went ahead with the marriage. He did not have sex with her until she had given birth; she had a son, and they named him Jesus.

The night of my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, I was in Bolivia eating dinner around a small table of Southern Baptist missionaries. This isn’t how most 21-year-olds dream of celebrating that big night, but I had convinced myself that this was exactly where I wanted to be. I was doing mission work I believed in, teaching a gospel I was *certain* about. I knew where my life was headed and what I would be doing. When I returned to the United States at the end of the summer, it was to start seminary in Texas, and as I began, I wore my faith like a sweater. Sometimes it was comfortable and warm, other times it felt itchy and too small.

The year I turned 21 was the same year a pastor named Rob Bell released a book called *Love Wins*, which I know some of you have studied here with Steve Jolly. While you studied it, though, I picked it up on an airplane solely for the sake of disproving it. I knew without having to read it that it was heresy, but everyone at school was talking about it, and I wanted to be able to tell them more specifically *why* they were wrong. My plane had barely left the ground when, there in very first chapter, Bell asked a question: “Does God punish people [...] with infinite, eternal torment for things they did in their few finite years of life? [Is it just a matter of] Being born in the right place, family, or country [where you’ll hear and accept the gospel]? [Or because you were fortunate enough to have] a youth pastor who ‘relates better to the kids’? [Or is it a matter of] God choosing you instead of others? [...] [What if the missionary that was going to tell you about Jesus got a flat tire?] What kind of God [would do] that?”

I reached into my apologetics logic for a good answer, but what it gave me back was: *Well... that’s a good question*. I kept reading, and the more I read, the more I felt I’d found some kind of loose thread in the Christian sweater I wore, and I couldn’t help but pull at it. *If it isn’t about salvation from hell*, I thought, *then what was it about? What was Jesus’ death for? What was Jesus for? What was the Bible about?* I kept pulling.

By the time I landed, I felt at once liberated and vulnerable, like I had unraveled my whole sweater. When Claire picked me up at the airport, I remember nervously saying, “I think our future might lay outside of the Southern Baptist Convention.”

It’s my impression that the sort of people who tend to be attracted to a place like Northminster each have some kind of story like that. This place seems to be full of people who have become disillusioned with some piece (or maybe many pieces) of the way the Christian story has been told. Maybe it was the story the church was telling about LGBTQ+ people that did it. Maybe it was questioning the justice of a God that would send someone to eternal conscious torment based only on a few, short years of subjective human experience. Maybe you noticed some Bible stories didn’t quite add up and began wondering if the Bible was what you thought it was. Maybe you noticed Christians seemed far more interested in political power than practicing what they preached. Whatever it was, most of us here today have come across some loose thread and began to pull. Whether out of curiosity or desperation, we pulled and pulled until what was once a warm, broken in sweater seemed only a tangle of threads at our feet, and then, whether it was by choice or because someone else asked us to, we had to leave

and find a new way to weave a narrative together in a way that seemed true, by the light of our own experience of God.

If you've been through this process, then you have some measure of reverence for the fact that there are many ways to weave the Christian story together, and that different ways of telling the story tend to foster different sorts of fruits: One story might produce the fruits of love, joy, and peace, while another fosters the fruit of pride, oppression, and bitterness.

But however many threads we've pulled, however much humble re-weaving we've done, this work is never quite finished. There is always some piece of inherited script or story, big or small that we've inherited, and we've never gotten around to touching, or perhaps we don't really want to. There are some narratives we've swallowed uncritically, loose threads we haven't found or been interested in. When this happens, we find ourselves reaching into this old theological grab bag of ideas and phrases we don't *really* believe in anymore, but we go ahead and use them because they're the best we've got. It's like becoming a parent and realizing with horror that in times of stress you're using those exact same phrases and threats *your* parents used to use – the ones you swore you'd never say.

The reason I bring this up, particularly now, in this season, is because I wonder how much this is the case for us when it comes to Christmas.

When it comes to Christmas, our culture has created a strong current in which we can be swept away. It will give us a story and script full of imagery and pathos like no other holiday and it's easy to get caught up in it - not that there's anything necessarily wrong with that! If you need a break, a time to sing and eat and rest with family, that's great. Enjoy it. Be kind to yourself. This sermon might not be for you right now. But, if you've found yourself disappointed... if you've found yourself wondering... hungry for a better story... if, for whatever reason, it's just not working for you anymore... then maybe it's time to start pulling threads.

It began to unravel for me when I began studying Isaiah for the first time, the passage we read today. That was the first loose thread I found on my Christmas sweater. In this morning's gospel reading, the storyteller wrote: *All this happened to fulfill what God has said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and give birth, and the child will be named Immanuel" —a name that means "God is with us."*

According to the story I'd inherited, that passage meant two important things: First, that the prophets predicted Jesus' birth because it was part of God's unfolding plan to save humanity, and second, that Jesus was born of a virgin because his father was God. But then, there's Isaiah.

The first time I read it, I was shocked at how politically contextual it was – the prophet Isaiah offering a specific sign to King Ahaz that a child would be born, and before the child grew up, the two nations the King feared will have fallen. It wasn't a prediction about the coming messiah I found, but a prophet pointing to a specific pregnant young woman whose child is actually born in the very next chapter!

Diving deeper, I learned that the Hebrew word *almah*, translated here as "virgin" more directly means "young woman" or "maiden." On some linguistic level, it's true, the word *could* certainly connote a virgin, but there's nothing in this passage to suggest the young woman Isaiah's talking about is a virgin when she gives birth. In fact, in the next chapter, Isaiah is revealed to be the child's father! So, where did this virgin birth language even come from?

I kept pulling the thread, and it turned out that when the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, in a document called the Septuagint, the translators used the word *parthenos*, which leans more towards the connotation of a "virgin." So, when the Christian Scriptures were being crafted, using the Septuagint as their source material, it was the word "virgin" that carried over because it created an excellent cradle in the imagination to talk about a man they referred to as the "Son of God." What this meant to me, though, was that the whole idea that the prophets predicted the birth and that Jesus was born of a virgin was based on... not much, it turned out.

This makes me think about the book *Educated*, by Tara Westover, which the Northminster book club is currently reading. It's a memoir about a Mormon survivalist family growing up in the mountains, and in the opening chapter, the author recalls her father leading their family devotional time and reading this passage from Isaiah.

Westover writes: *"Butter and honey shall he eat,' Dad droned on, low and monotone, weary from a long day hauling scrap. 'That he may know to refuse the evil, and choose the good.'"* She then tells of how this verse caught in her father's imagination, and he read it over and over, inquiring of the Lord what divine doctrine he had happened upon.

*"The next morning," she writes, "Dad purged our fridge of milk, yogurt and cheese, and that evening when he came home, his truck was loaded with fifty gallons of honey.*

*‘Isaiah doesn’t say which is evil, butter or honey,’ Dad said, grinning as my brothers lugged the white tubs to the basement. ‘But if you ask, the Lord will tell you!’*

*When Dad read the verse to his mother, she laughed in his face. ‘I got some pennies in my purse,’ she said. ‘You better take them. They’ll be all the sense you got.’”*

This kind of fanatical misinterpretation is comical to read about in a memoir about fundamentalism... but less comical to realize your holy scriptures make the exact same interpretive move.

Once that thread came loose, I found another.

I realized for the first time that Luke and Matthew have different, contradictory accounts of the birth story, each with their own unique nuance, and our culture had unceremoniously smashed them together in an attempt at harmonization. Mark and John don’t seem to think it’s important at all!

I kept pulling.

I then learned that in the first and second centuries, there were rumors flying around meant to discredit Christianity that Jesus’ mother had actually had a scandalous relationship with a Roman soldier (an idea I used in last week’s sermon), and that the early church may have come up with stories of Mary’s virginity to overcompensate in the other direction.

I kept pulling.

I then began to notice the hypocrisy of celebrating a poor family giving birth in a barn by spending hundreds or thousands of dollars on presents, of celebrating the legacy of a man who told us to give up our wealth by feeding the spirit of consumerism and scarcity in our children.

I kept pulling.

I realized that Jesus wasn’t born on the 25<sup>th</sup>, but rather that was the day Rome celebrated the birth of their sun god, and when Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the empire in the fourth century, he decided people were used to celebrating on that day anyway, so it would do for Christmas.

I kept pulling...

I know some of this may sound stupid. I mean, who cares about how Rome decided on the 25<sup>th</sup>? And I know that far more intelligent men than me have looked into the same discrepancies and still came away with very different conclusions. But I mention these because

each unique realization was a hammer to my fragile sense of certainty – loose threads in my tapestry of faith. They were reminders of how much I had just inherited, swallowed uncritically. With each question, the narrative unraveled until what I had left seemed only a tangle of threads at my feet.

I became an evangelist of the bad news, as most do when they hit this stage of deconstruction. It feels so satisfying to be angry! It's cathartic! We've discovered that what has come apart was not a shelter, but a cage, and we spout our newfound cynicism like street preachers that can't understand why everyone else isn't pulling the threads too. It's fun to tear things apart – to call out the translators, blame the patriarchy, criticize the power-hungry church! Some of us are there right now, and that's okay, because it's not the sort of work you can hurry through. It's not something you can rush, because it's not until those narratives have come unwound that you can get to the best part: Reconstruction. Second naïveté. Re-weaving by the light of our own experience until we find what is most true. That is where the magic happens.

When I came back to it, I was awestruck by the stories I found on the pages of Matthew and Luke. They were no longer vessels for cold, dogmatic beliefs, no longer pages of history or ammunition in a culture war to “keep Christ in Christmas”... but instead, I found a story full of subversive political imagery about toppling colonial empires and standing up to power-hungry, unjust rulers.

I found a story full of social statements about who matters and why and the unexpected places they're found.

I found a story full of poetic references to Hebrew law and prophets, like Isaiah, that used their common religious language to show how embodied love fulfills all things.

I found a story full of mystical implications about the blurry lines between what is human and what is divine.

I found a story full of poetry about how hope, peace, joy, and love are born into this world and how they are good news for all people.

The story of Christmas and what it means for our world is bold and transformative, but only for those brave enough to discover it by pulling on the threads of that worn out Christmas sweater we've inherited. You may come to very different conclusions than I did, and that is just

fine. Perspective is a gift we can offer one another. But whatever thread you pull, whatever story you uncover, may you find that truth is never threatened by your questions.

May you find yourself in the midst of the story of Love made flesh, transformed by it, allowing God's love to be made flesh again in you.

For those of you hungry for a better story, may you find it in this Christmas season.

Merry Christmas, Northminster.