

Christmas Eve, 2019 The Rev. Scott Walters

It's Christmas. Which means it's time for all those horrible "Best of the Year" lists, right? Aren't they oppressive? The New York Times alone declared the 54 Best Songs, the 17 Most Striking Homes, and the 10 Most Idyllic Destinations of 2019. The published lists of the best actors, best dance, best theater, best art. The best movies, best albums, best TV shows. They told us about the top 10 new restaurants, and recipes, and the best "wine moments" of the year (whatever those are). The Times even listed the 10 Best Los Angeles Dishes of 2019. Seriously? Do they get to do that?

But the list I hate most of all is "The 100 Best Books of the Year." Another year, another 99-100 books I'm supposed to have read, but haven't. Another year, another long addition to this annual expanding measure of my inadequacy. Anybody else have this experience? Or is it actually true that everything, even the New York Times, really is all about me?

Fortunately, if I were to compile a much shorter list of my own favorite books for 2019, Lewis Hyde's *A Primer for Forgetting* would be near the top. The premise of the book is that the capacity to forget is even more essential to being human than remembering is. This world and our histories pile up in a hurry on us, moment by moment. Life is a barrage, not only of unread books and unseen movies, but of sights and sounds and smells. Conversations and encounters with people, places, things. If we weren't constantly letting go of almost everything we experience, we would each go quite literally mad, wouldn't we?

We have to forget if we're to live. That insight might take a bit of the pressure off the urge to prove ourselves always by being and doing and knowing just a little more. But what if something similar could even be said even of God?

We like to imagine a God without limits. A God who is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, and all the wonderful omni-things. But those words aren't actually in the Bible, even if it suggests God can know and do and be a lot more than any of us can. Some might even argue that there's a lot more divine *incarnation* than omnipotence in the Bible.

We really will get to the Bible and maybe even to the story of the Nativity in a minute, but there's a page in *A Primer for Forgetting* that caught my Christmas attention in particular. Lewis Hyde tells of the people of the Trobriand Islands off the coast of New Guinea, who have a curious cosmology. They see the universe as a vast and disembodied space filled with energy and cosmic minds. Minds that are all-seeing, all-knowing, and all-powerful, able to manipulate the universe's energy to whatever ends they desire.

Sounds pretty much in line with everyone else who assigns all those "omni" words to God, right? But the cosmic minds have a problem: boredom. Cosmic boredom.

They can do anything they imagine, but since they have no needs their power has no purpose. They may know everything there is to know, but that just means there is nothing left to think about. Which means they are really, really bored. So the cosmic minds invented a game to entertain themselves. It's called life.

To play, you must be born as a human being. Which means you have to forget all that cosmic knowledge and take in only what can be known through the body. "A human being," according to the Trobriand myth, "is someone who has abandoned the boring surfeit of knowledge so as to come alive."

It's not exactly Luke. But it doesn't feel entirely foreign to the Nativity story either, does it? The characters who matter most in the Christmas story are not the ones who have read all the books and can do all the things. At the heart of this story are people of severe limitations. And God seems to be one of them.

What Luke tells us, and what subsequent generations of Christian theologians will insist, is that God is present to the world as the body of a baby. And what most Christians have insisted on ever since, is not that the infant Jesus already knows every last word of all 100 books on the New York Times best of 2019 list along with everything else knowable in the universe as well. No. What Christians have said is that God is present in all God's fulness in this child, who is just as fully human. No flinching from either truth.

It's not that a little bit of God's self is leaking just a little into humanity at the Nativity. But that God's fulness is immediately here, birthed into being as Mary's child, who truly knows only what can be known through the body.

When's the last time you imagined God taking in the world without language and with far less processing power than you carry around in your little skull?

The people around the Christ child are lacking as well, of course. If you have a lot of knowledge and power, and if you can be wherever you want to be, you don't end up giving birth in a barn and laying your child in a manger, do you? No. Mary and Joseph and Jesus are all down at the weak and vulnerable and unknowing end of the world while the emperor decrees his registration so he'll have a nice long list of the people subject to his control. Maybe pay attention to who makes the lists in our stories and why.

And that multitude of heavenly host? Well, they appear not to the emperor, but to shepherds. The lowest caste of laborers. If the story were set in the town of my childhood, maybe the angels appear to people in hairnets working the graveyard shift at a chicken processing plant. The ones who have to work Christmas Eve. That's where the glory shows up in this story.

As for Mary, in our minds and in our art she usually has the body of a 22 year old and the emotional maturity of a 62 year old. But she could have been betrothed as young as age 12. Which means she wasn't only poor and female, but she was almost certainly young. Maybe what we would call an adolescent.

Ardelle once pointed out to me that when Mary so famously said yes to God at the Annunciation, she was probably at an age when human beings seem hard wired to say yes to all kinds of dangerous and terrifying things. Terrifying to all us older and more responsible people, at least, right? I mean, would you cast a teenager or even a tweenager as the one to make a pivotal choice in the redemption of the world? Then again, would someone who had accumulated a little more worldly wisdom and experience have had the nerve to say, "Yes. Let it be with me according to your word"?

Detail after detail in this familiar old story drives home the truth that God's ways are not ours. And the shape of the story of our redemption begins with a divine letting go of almost everything we associate with being God. A forgetting, if you will. Or, in the words of St Paul in Philippians, an emptying.

The story of the Nativity can disrupt and reform our images of God, even as it reshapes our image of what it means to be human. Because maybe you, like me, think what God wants of us is always to be a little more. We need to have gained more knowledge or experience or influence or age. Not even necessarily to feed our egos, but maybe just to do more good in a world in which there is so much good that needs doing. But that world...that world of all you might have known or done...that world can pile up on us in a hurry. There will always be infinitely more of what's undone to confess, even for the most energetic doer.

But the Christmas story, at its core, is a story, not of God adding superpowers to ordinary human beings in order to save us, but of the fulness of God coming among us as an infant with nearly no knowledge or power at all. And about God using human beings, severely limited creatures that we are, to help carry out the plan of redemption.

If we could truly take just this one Christmas truth in, maybe we could also begin to see the world as God sees it. Maybe we would not see the very young as people only of potential, but as full members of the human family who have a perspective and a place in our lives that are utterly needed. Maybe we would see our elders, not as people who were relevant to the world once upon a time, but as whole people whose perspective and priorities might rearrange our own if we paid them the attention God does.

The same could be said of the poor, the marginalized, the undereducated, the unimportant by any standard we choose. Maybe also of the salesman who fails to reach his quota, the therapist who can't ease a client's pain, maybe even the priest who still can't quite preach the perfect Christmas Eve sermon.

So, if you've come here tonight full of doubts and feelings of inadequacy... if you're nursing a dashed hope or two and feel like you will never read enough books or visit enough places or do whatever it is you think makes for a successful human life... well, if any of that is true even in a corner of your life, the story we've come to hear yet again and learn to trust a little more... This is your story.

Because it is a sacred story that says, not only did God come to redeem a life that looks just like yours. It says God still uses lives like yours, imperfect and incomplete as they are, to bring redeeming love into the world. Which means tonight, the most glorious "Let it be with me according to your word," might just be yours.