

To Whom Will You Compare Me?

Genesis 1:26-27; Isaiah 40:18-20, 25-31

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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January 25, 2026/Third Sunday After Epiphany

Today marks the second Sunday of our 2026 Faith Questions sermon series, the series where your questions set the preaching agenda from the time roughly between Epiphany and Lent.

I want to thank Greg for filling in for me last Sunday (and on such a small topic—the sin of the world!).

Today's question has to do with our relatively new *Voices Together* hymnal and the various ways in which certain hymns have been “updated.”

One of the main areas would be in altering gendered language but there are others.

The key question this week's questioner wanted to ask was, **“If we buy into the political and cultural changes of society, how do we address God?”**

I've chosen two Scripture readings this morning to lay a kind of biblical/theological foundation for the question before looking at a few songs.

The first has to do with the question of gender and God. **I want to begin with the foundational truth that male and female human beings reflect the image of God.**

In our reading from Genesis 1, the Hebrew word translated into “humans” in the NRSV and “mankind” in many other translations, is *adam*. Most basically, this word means “human” or “person” or even “of the earth” (i.e., “earthing”).

The Hebrew word for soil or dirt is *adamah*, so there's a bit of wordplay going on in Hebrew that we miss in English. *Adam* from *adamah*. “Earthling from the earth,” or something like that.

At any rate, the word *adam* only becomes a proper name for a male person later in Genesis 4. Originally, it simply meant “human” or “person.”

So, God created *adam*—humankind, male and female—to collectively reflect God’s image.

God is not male. God is not female. God is not a male/female hybrid.

God is God and transcends our categories.

The second point flows out of the first. **All our ways of referring to God are constrained by the limitations of human language and the constraints of metaphors.**

Our passage from Isaiah begins with a question: To whom (or to what) will you compare me? The implied answer is obvious: No one. Nothing.

All our metaphors, all our ways of referring to and addressing God are limited and partial.

When we say (or sing), “O God, you are my Shepherd,” we are not saying that God is a nomadic herdsman, we are saying something about the way God tends and guides and cares for us.

When we say (or sing) “O Lord, you are the Lion of Judah,” we are not saying that God is a powerful cat with long mane and sharp claws. We are saying something about the strength and majesty of God.

When we say (or sing) “God, you are the Rock of my Salvation,” we are not saying that God is a chunk of granite. We are saying something about God as sturdy, reliable, unable to be shaken.

When we say (or sing) that God is our Father, we are not saying that God is the male parent who joined with a female parent to produce us. We are saying something about how God loves us like a good Father might, protecting, correcting, etc.

So, all metaphors, all ways of referring to God run into limits. We are using our categories to attempt to describe, refer to, relate to Someone who cannot be contained in these.

Let’s move to two points about culture.

We must acknowledge that Scripture (and many of the hymns that borrow its language) was written during patriarchal times.

During the vast time period in which Scripture was written (and for most of recorded history) women simply were not seen as equal to men (despite the foundational truth that men and women both reflect the image of God).

Christianity has been hugely influential in changing this. Jesus consistently elevated women. They were among his followers. They were the first witnesses to his resurrection. More importantly, he simply treated women with dignity and equality.

The church was (and sometimes still is) very slow to catch up with Jesus here.

But it's not just on gender where Scripture seems to come to us from a different world. To cite just one other example, the language of kings and kingdoms doesn't resonate much with our experience. We'll see an example of this shortly.

We could go on. Often, when we are hearing scripture or sacred music from different times and places, there is a cultural gap that must be navigated and interpreted.

Last point. The culture(s) which gave rise to Scripture and to hymns which draw from Scripture and even the cultures in which some of our hymns were written are highly imperfect.

And so is ours. This is *really* important to remember.

I think we tend to assume that our cultural moment represents the pinnacle of human development and that all our assumptions are good and worthy of validation.

They're not. Every human culture gets some things right and some things wrong. Every human culture has blind spots. Including ours. Sometimes we make genuine progress in how we think about God; sometimes we regress. This is who we are.

Sometimes elements of the past need to be left behind; sometimes they have a corrective word to offer us. There is so much that could be said here, but I will have to leave that for another time.

So, these are the four foundational realities that I want us to have in mind as we look at the question of how we should be referring to God in our songs.

1. God is not male. God is not female. Male and female human beings together reflect God's image.
2. All language about God takes place within the limitations and constraints of human language and metaphor.
3. Much of the language we use to refer to God (in our Scriptures and in our hymns) was written during a different time than our own, a very imperfect time.
4. Our culture is also imperfect. Our current sensibilities do not represent the objective moral standard by which to evaluate all others.

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Ok, let's move on to discussing a few hymns. Specifically, the hymns we have sung or will sing this morning, all of which come from *Voices Together* which was produced in 2020.

VT 428 – Praise With Joy the World's Creator

The first hymn represents the most dramatic overhaul of any of the three we'll discuss today. It shares a tune with a hymn from the blue hymnal from 1992, "Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven."

It is an attempt to "update" a hymn that was written in the 1800's. The Iona community from Scotland rewrote lyrics in 1987.

I'll highlight a few changes.

- the language of God's kingship and royalty is replaced by images of God as Creator
- themes of justice, feeding the hungry, freeing the captive, healing the sick, and "upsetting religion" take the place of rescue from foes, God being "slow to chide, quick to bless," etc.
- Male language is removed ("praise him, "praise him") as are references to God as Father (this will be a theme throughout the morning); emphases instead are on forging bonds between race and gender.

What do we make of this?

Well, I think we must say that these are two very different songs lyrically. And maybe that's ok.

Both versions of the song contain prominent biblical themes. Both highlight important truths about God's character and faithfulness.

The earlier hymn certainly portrays God in more exalted, royal language, but as I alluded to earlier, this is language that likely does not resonate with many people living in pluralistic democracies as it would have in other points in history.

The second version focuses more on the Trinitarian nature of God and the ways in which God's reconciling work finds expression in the world.

Both hymns celebrate and invite us to praise the God who creates, who is faithful to his creation, who is a source of blessing and guidance.

I think either could be chosen depending on which themes a community wanted to emphasize during a given time of worship.

VT 103 – Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee

From a song where they changed everything in the most recent hymnal we move to one where they changed only one line.

This line comes in verse three. In the blue hymnal, the third line reads:

- Thou our Father, Christ our brother, all who live in love are thine.

In *Voices Together*, we sang:

- Known in Jesus Christ our brother, all who live in love are thine.
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The only thing the committee changed in this song is the elimination of the word Father.

I can understand why some prefer this. For some, "father" language drags up the history of patriarchy that we discussed earlier. God is not male, why should we refer to him in male categories?

While many of us have been blessed with excellent earthly fathers (I certainly have!), some people have difficult relationships with their fathers. Some have had abusive fathers, absent fathers, oppressive fathers.

“Father” can be a term that dredges up pain and some would prefer not to use the term for God. Why not emphasize Christ as our brother instead?

But surely, we can see a problem here. Some people have painful relationships with their brothers, too. And their mothers. And their sisters.

There is no human relationship where someone somewhere might not struggle with a term used for God because it has not been a positive association in their lives. We’re back to the limitations of all metaphors and all language.

More importantly, Jesus routinely referred to God as “Father.” The prayer he taught his followers to pray begins with “Our Father.”

When God chose to take on human flesh, he did so in a male person (Jesus) who referred to himself often as “the Son.” This was undoubtedly an accommodation to the time and place and culture, but it is how God chose to disclose God’s self to the world.

It is difficult to refer to Jesus and to his own self-understanding if we eliminate the word “father” from our theological and liturgical vocabulary.

The church universal has always confessed God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Yes, we can use the language of Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. I use these terms myself.

But as a general operating principle, I don’t like trying to be holier or more “inclusive” than Jesus.

I would always prefer to rehabilitate words that have negative associations or have been used poorly than to get rid of them. And to expand upon them (I’m all for elevating and highlighting more maternal references to God!).

So, while I understand the impulse behind changes like the one in this song, I think this attempt to “update” a hymn is misguided.

VT 180 – This is God’s Wondrous World

Ok, last song. This is the song that we’re going to sing immediately after the sermon. “This is God’s Wondrous World” (an updated version of “This is my Father’s World”).

That is the one that suspect is most likely to evoke the strongest feelings for many. It’s a dearly loved song.

The biggest change, obviously, is once again the elimination of the word “Father.” I’ve talked about this, so I won’t belabour the point.

A few other changes to note:

- Verse 2 - “the morning light, the lily white” has been changed to “the morning light, the dark of night”
- Verse 2 – “he shines in all that’s fair” has been changed to “a wand’rer I may roam”
- Verse 2 – “in the rustling grass, I hear him pass, he speaks to me everywhere” had been changed to “whate’er my lot, it matters not, my heart is still at home.”

In general, I would say that these changes have been made to reflect something of the shadow side of human experience. Instead of pleasant images of God being seen in the created world, we have references to wanderers roaming and the dark of night and our hearts being at home whatever our lot.

I will plainly say that I prefer the old version of this song. I prefer “my Father’s world” to “God’s wondrous world,” not least because it’s more personal. Not “God” in the abstract’s world, but “My Father’s world.”

I will also say that I appreciate the themes added by the new song. And I do think that God’s world is truly wondrous.

Here, I think I must admit that it can be difficult to sort out what is legitimate critique and what is just subjective preference and nostalgia.

This is probably true for many of our reactions to the updating of old hymns. Sometimes, we just like what we like because it’s familiar, it’s what we grew up with, it brings back pleasant memories from a formational stage of our lives.

I've read studies that show that the music that we listened to roughly between adolescence and young adulthood is the music that stays with us for life.

A while back, I was in a gift shop somewhere and I saw a slogan on a tea towel or something that said: "My ability to remember song lyrics from the 80s far exceeds my ability to remember why I walked into the kitchen." ☺ This is me.

And while I don't want to equate the hymns of the church with hard rock from the late 80s, I think it points to the simple truth that music moves us and music that moved us at specific times in our life sometimes has the deepest hold on us.

This isn't bad. This is how we're wired. But it also doesn't mean that every song that evokes strong emotions in us is sacred or free from error or needs to remain unchanged for all time.

In this case, I think both "This is My Father's world" and "This is God's Wondrous World" are beautiful versions of a song that many people love, and which express deep truths about God.

I prefer the old one, but I will happily sing the new one (and I hope you will too, in a few minutes!).

(And just because we sing one version today, doesn't mean we can't sing another one at another time! We don't have to get rid of old versions of songs or stop singing them just because a hymnal committee decided to make some changes!)

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I want to start wrapping this up by reading from document I found online called "Expansive Language in *Voices Together*: Gendered Images of God":

The committee recognizes that the choices made in *Voices Together* will prompt a range of responses—joy, grief, alarm, relief, confusion, and more. Since a variety of approaches to language are used, it is unlikely anyone will be satisfied with every decision. The hymnal is not intended to cater to one person or community, but instead is meant to serve the diversity within Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite

Church Canada by supporting faithful worship that is true to the God we encounter in Scripture, the Anabaptist tradition, and our daily lives.¹

And so, we must end where we so often end in the Christian faith. With grace.

In Philippians 4-5, we read these words:

Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

Even as we have robust conversations and healthy debates about language about gender and language and metaphors, can we do this when it comes to the songs that we sing? Can we look not to our own interests but the interests of others?

I think we can. And I think we must.

What is true for cultures and time periods is true of people. None of us sees perfectly clearly and truly on any matter. We all have blind spots; we all have subjective preferences that we easily elevate to matters of great theological importance.

The only antidote to this is grace. Grace for those who don't see things the same as we might. Grace for ourselves who sometimes are too eager to make sure our voices are heard.

And ultimately the grace of God for all of us who blunder and bumble along with all our partial and inadequate metaphors, all of which, at their best, are reaching to describe and to praise the One who is beyond compare.

We are going to sing "This is God's Wondrous World." If, for you, the words in this song represent a long overdue update, I hope you will sing with joy.

If you lament the changes to this song and prefer, "This is My Father's World," I invite you to the interests of your sisters and brothers who may see things differently and sing with joy.

¹ <https://voicestogetherhymnal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Expansive-Language-in-VT-2.pdf>

And I invite all of you to do the same when the roles are reversed and we sing “This is My Father’s World” down the road. Which we will.

May God give us the grace we need. May it saturate our singing and our songs. May we have the mind of Christ every day and in every way.

Amen.

