

Hymns of the Faith: “This is My Father's World”

By [Dr. Bill Wymond](#)

*A Presentation of First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi
with
Dr. Ligon Duncan, Dr. Derek Thomas, and Dr. Bill Wymond*

Dr. Wymond: Good morning! This is “Hymns of the Faith,” brought to you by Jackson's First Presbyterian Church. The minister of the First Presbyterian Church is Dr. Ligon Duncan. Stay tuned for “Hymns of the Faith.”... And now here with “Hymns of the Faith” is Dr. Duncan.

Dr. Duncan: Thank you, Bill Wymond. This is Ligon Duncan, along with Derek Thomas, and together the three of us are here for “Hymns of the Faith,” where we explore this rich deposit of theological and devotional treasure that has been given to us in our hymnals. It's our joy Lord's Day after Lord's Day to study some of the great hymns of the church.

Today we come to what has just over a very short period of time become a very, very beloved hymn in the United States of America, certainly. This hymn comes from the early days of the twentieth century. It was written in 1901 by a Presbyterian minister with a strange name. We were speculating about the origins of this name off the air before we came on...the strange name of Maltbie Babcock, who in his short life has some remarkable things that can be said about it. But this hymn, too, Bill, reminds me of Vacation Bible School. I think, along with *Fairest Lord Jesus*, I can remember singing this hymn in Vacation Bible School, probably when I was six years old. It's always been a favorite hymn of mine. You were telling us off-air that a former pastor of this congregation that may be known to some of the folks in our listening audience, Dr. John Reed Miller...Reed really loved this hymn.

Dr. Wymond: He did. I think there was something in the text that really drew him, probably more than the music. But the music is nice. I like this tune. It's a charming tune, rather than a strong tune, and I think it fits well the description of the beauty of God's world and so on like that, but of course the hymn goes much farther than just talking about the beauties of nature.

This particular tune was written by Franklin Sheppard, and he was Secretary for the Presbyterian Board of Publications. He had the responsibility of putting out a hymnal for Sunday School use, which was really common at the end of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century. A lot of Presbyterian Sunday

Schools had their own hymnal — “Hymnal for Youth,” they called it, although these were not childlike or childish hymns. They were really good substantial hymns that they had in them. So this tune he wrote for this particular set of words, and the TERRA BEATA, which is the Latin name for the tune, means *happy or blessed earth*.

Dr. Duncan: Why don't you play this tune for us, Bill? I think many, many people know it the minute they hear the words, *This Is My Father's World*. But it is a pretty tune, and let's have a listen. [Dr. Wymond plays.]

You know, Bill, another thing that this hymn tune reminds me of is of my days in elementary school, in a public school. In the late 1960's, being in a public school, certainly in the South of the United States, you still had the feel of the generic Protestantism that had kind of characterized the United States for at least the middle hundred years of our existence, and this tune along with others.... I can think of Thanksgiving songs like *We Gather Together* that would be played at school assemblies around Thanksgiving time. This hymn sort of captured that kind of generic Protestantism that would have been a part of even public schools in those days. And I'm pretty sure I can remember Mrs. Tiedemann playing this...my second grade teacher...during school assembly, and singing it at a public school in Greenville County, South Carolina. But the tune itself, you were saying, was written for the text — is that right?

Dr. Wymond: Well, it was, but actually I need to say that Sheppard probably didn't originate this tune. He said that it resembled a tune that his mother used to sing for him when he was a child, and hymnologists have found tunes like this in English folksongs, so it probably has an English folksong background to it.

Dr. Duncan: You were mentioning it was written for Sunday School use, and most of us, when we hear the words “Sunday School” we're thinking most in terms of how you disciple the young people who are in your church in their younger ages. Back in these days, Sunday School would more have been an outreach to children who otherwise might not have been exposed not only to church life, but maybe even to education.

Didn't the whole Sunday School idea in the nineteenth century come out of these children that were working in the factories, and the only opportunity that they had to learn things and to sing things and do the things that other children were doing in school during the week would be on Sunday? So it was sort of a Protestant outreach that was typical for the North of the United States, I think, in the larger industrial towns — Philadelphia, and New York, and elsewhere. And so there were whole hymnals that were developed, presumably that would have had tunes that would have been pleasing to the ear, based on what people were listening to in those days and simple enough for children to sing. And you can kind of feel those kinds of tunes. That's why I'm sure that I remember them from Vacation Bible School, because they were sort of “child friendly” kind of tunes.

Dr. Wymond: Sunday Schools, I think, here, were copied, of the sort that you're talking about, from those in England. I know that my great-great-grandfather was in Liverpool and had schools for the poor in his cottage, it's said. And other cottages. So that was something that obviously the industrialized North copied. I think you're right.

Dr. Duncan: Derek, the author of this hymn, Maltbie Babcock, that is, the one who wrote the text, had a very interesting, if short, life. Tell us a little bit about Maltbie Babcock.

Dr. Thomas: Yes...Maltbie Davenport Babcock came from a socially prominent family in Syracuse, New York, in August of 1858. He dies...he's 42 when he dies...doesn't reach his forth-third birthday, so he has a short life. He attends the University in Syracuse, New York, and then attends Auburn Theological Seminary—which is where?

Dr. Duncan: Which is also in New York.

Dr. Thomas: And still there? Hasn't moved?

Dr. Duncan: Well, I think it enfolded into another institution there.

Dr. Thomas: And he was ordained as a minister of the Presbyterian Church, and begins to preach at Lockport. And from there goes to a very famous church, the Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, where we are told that he was so popular with the students of Johns Hopkins University that a room was set aside for him in one of the buildings of the university where he might minister and hold conferences with them. He was also chosen to succeed Dr. Henry van Dyke, who was a very famous figure, at the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City.

One description of him...now you warned us in an earlier program about folklore descriptions of authors of hymns from popular hymnbooks, but one such describes him in this way: "A manlier man than Maltbie Davenport Babcock never stood in a Christian pulpit." [Well, I've seen some pretty manly men in pulpits in Scotland!] "He grew up tall, broad-shouldered, with muscles of iron; a superb specimen of physical manhood." [I can't imagine anyone being described that way today.] He was a champion baseball pitcher and a swimmer. He was capable of doing (I read somewhere) impersonations, good at drawing, full of fun and mischief. There was a story about him quietly seizing a young man who had used foul language by the nape of his neck and the seat of his trousers and "with a word of forceful warning, pitched him over the fence." Well, this gentle hymn, *This Is My Father's World*, which is often associated with a gentle author, may have come from this very athletic young man, Maltbie Davenport Babcock. He died in Naples, in Italy, in May of 1901. He was on his way...on a trip to the Holy

Land.

Dr. Duncan: And our good friend, Phil Ryken, has two volumes of reflections on the world that have taken their titles from this one very famous hymn. The first volume was called *My Father's World*, and the whole idea of this was Phil's sort of looking at the world from a Christian perspective as belonging to God. For those that are into Kuiper or VanTil, they can hear the echoes of "Everything in this world belongs to God; not one square inch of this universe doesn't have 'Mine' stamped on it. Every molecule says 'Jesus is Lord.'" You can hear those sorts of Kuiperian/VanTilian assertions coming out of the language of *My Father's World*. The other volume of Phil's reflections is called *He Speaks to Me Everywhere* [is that the second title?], which again is pulled out of this hymn.

It's almost a reflection on Psalm 19 in some ways, in that it's looking to the creation and seeing God's witness to himself displayed even in the beauty of the created order. The text goes like this: "This is my Father's world...." And that's actually a brave declaration for Christians to make sometimes, in the face of some of the things that we see and experience in the Christian life. So that's maybe sweet, but it's brave.

"This is my Father's world, and to my list'ning ears,
All nature sings, and round me rings the music of the spheres."

It's a declaration that because God has opened our hearts and our ears, we can see the very clear witness that He has given to himself in nature all about us.

"This is my Father's world: I rest me in the thought
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas;
His hand the wonders wrought."

So it's a declaration that all of these things are not the product of blind chance or impersonal evolution, but they have been brought into being by an all-knowing, all-loving God. And it's his declaration that this world belongs to his Father, and testifies to Him.

The second stanza goes on to reflect this way:

"This is my Father's world, the birds their carols raise,
The morning light, the lily white, declare their Maker's praise."

And so we could probably reference twenty passages in the Psalms and elsewhere which indicate how nature gives praise to God... "The heavens declare the glories of God" (Psalm 19)...but we could also go to some of those later Psalms, like Psalm 104, and find the same kinds of declarations.

"This is my Father's world: He shines in all that's fair;

In the rustling grass I hear Him pass,
He speaks to me everywhere.”

And that's the line from which Phil borrowed the second title in his series on worldview reflections.

And then, I like this third stanza maybe the best of all. Because it really grapples with some of the hard things that believers encounter in this life:

This is my Father's world, O let me ne'er forget
That thought the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the Ruler yet.

This is my Father's world: the battle is not done;
Jesus who died shall be satisfied,
And earth and heav'n be one.

The final line, I think, almost makes the hymn. The first two stanzas alone could be written off as complete sentiment, or sentimentalism, whereas the third stanza really grapples with believers in Christ facing hard, hard things, and yet still declaring that God is the ruler and that this world belongs to Him, and that the last word has not been said, and that Jesus will be satisfied and He will rule over earth and heaven. And I think the very reference of “earth and heaven be one” sort of reminds you of “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Now what's missing, of course, from the hymn is there is no clear articulation of the gospel. The only reference is “Jesus who died.” Now that's better than some things we hear these days, even some things that are sung in conservative evangelical churches. But there's not a ton of gospel. You have to assume the gospel coming to the text. I think that's probably another reason why this song was featured in more popular, sort of generically Protestant hymnbooks and songbooks, and was even used in the public schools in the twentieth century. Bill?

Dr. Wymond: Well, I was just going to say though the language is poetic in the first and second stanzas, I do like the implications for evangelism—of the connection that you could make with Romans 1 and 2; and I think that's a really important thing that a lot of people overlook, the fact that nature really does testify in such a strong way that there is a God, that every person is held responsible for that testimony. When they look out and they see these beautiful things and the order of nature, and so on like that, it just is a clear message that there really is a God there.

Dr. Duncan: Derek, we've seen that made in our own time in very sophisticated arguments by people like Michael Behe, who have argued from the irreducible complexity of nature for the existence of God, and even famous agnostics or

skeptics are atheists like Anthony Flew being convinced by that kind of argumentation. So certainly the witness that God has left in nature is not inconsiderable in our evangelism.

Dr. Thomas: And I think that our hymnology...I think we need to do a lot of work when we sing these hymns in bringing that to the fore. I think we sing these hymns and allow the sentiment to take over without reflecting on the scriptural doctrine of creation and created-ness, and a Creator/creature distinction that is a part of the witness of Psalm 19 and other places, and Romans 1, but removes this from mere sentiment.

But I've always liked the beginning of that third stanza:

“This is my Father's world, O let me ne'er forget
That thought the wrong seems off so strong,
God is the Ruler yet.”

And it's an affirmation of what in theology we would call a “no-risk view” of providence: that God is in control and that providence isn't risky: that there aren't aspects of providence that even God doesn't know or can't control, or that come as a surprise to Him. And the pastoral significance of that for Christians who are struggling with horrendous difficulties...I think the sheer simplicity of that language is deeply pastoral. You're tempted to write that on the flyleaf of your Bible, just to remind you.

Dr. Duncan: It is interesting, too — and we've seen this in so many hymns — how the hymn preaches to the singer of the hymn. As you're singing these words, even as you're singing them as a praise, as a confession of faith, you're preaching to yourself. You're saying, ‘Self, you need to believe this.’ And I do think that's an important function of what we sing in the church. You and I can preach until we're blue in the face, and people can assent to certain things that we are saying and really believe what they're saying. But some of these things have to be worked down into the heart. And I think that part of what we're doing when we're singing is trying to work those truths down into our hearts so that when the wrong comes into our experience, we really are prepared to believe that God is still the ruler.

Dr. Thomas: Well, right! It's one thing to believe that this is my Father's world when I'm fishing beside a nice clear river and the birds are singing and the flowers are blooming, and it's springtime, and it's wonderful. But it's another thing to say this is my Father's world and I'm in a hospital, or I'm beside an open grave, or I'm witnessing a loved one dying. And that's why I think it moves from the sentimental to...in a very gentle way, moves to the hard place. “This is my Father's world.” Scholars of Calvin will often say that Calvin's favorite designation of God is Father—not Lord, not Yahweh, not Jehovah, but Father! And I think that's deeply, deeply moving: This is my Father's world.

Dr. Duncan: I think your point is well taken that we need to do a little work in preparing people to sing songs like this. I know that I need that help, because it would be very easy for me to just sort of drop back to the mode of, “Okay, I’m in second grade again at Donaldson Elementary School singing this in the school assembly.” And I think remembering that this was a very manly hymn author...this isn’t just sort of syrupy sentimental stuff from his standpoint, although he must have no doubt really loved nature. You can see how he liked walking out in the fields, and he liked doing these sorts of things that were athletic and outdoorsy and such — fine. But the assertions that are being made really are substantial, and I think also just reminding people of how bold these very simple and pretty declarations are: “This is my Father’s world” is a brave thing for people to say...for people who are facing cancer.

Dr. Wymond: You used the term “secure” or “safe” providence? Was that what you said?

Dr. Thomas: Right. A “no risk view” of providence.

Dr. Wymond: Sometimes people use that word *providence* as just a substitute for the forces of nature or something. What do you mean by *providence*?

Dr. Thomas: Well, *provideo* (*to see beforehand*) is literally the Latin, so it’s “God’s in control.” And the idea of control is there. God can see before it happens, because He causes it to come about. He is the ultimate author of all things. And that’s a very strong doctrine. It’s a very reassuring doctrine. I know that people like to say in bad situations, ‘God isn’t there’ or ‘God’s hands were tied’ or whatever, but that is no comfort at all, to know that there are black holes in the universe where God’s power and God’s rule isn’t there anymore. I’ve never seen the pastoral benefit of that. And apart from that, it isn’t true.

I love this hymn more now that Ligon has explained it a little to me. I think I’ve got the sense in this program that this is not a children’s hymn. And I don’t get the sense that it was written for children. I rather think this is a pastorally written grownup’s hymn, if I can put it that way.

Dr. Duncan: That’s a good way to put it. And certainly it was not published until either the year of his death or after his death. Did we read that all of his stuff was published after his death?

Dr. Wymond: Yes, and this tune was written after his death, or put together...

Dr. Duncan: Yes, so whether they deployed it for children’s use is another thing. I’m sure, no doubt, his appeal...and I hear people say this about Dr. Lowe here at First Pres — that he was an athletic man and he had a great rapport with young people, and a lot of young people were attracted to his ministry. And I get the

idea that that's the kind of guy that Maltbie Babcock was, and that may be one reason why they thought of using this in a Sunday School setting — that he would be known as an athlete. This was happening at the beginning of the twentieth century. It happened with Eric Liddell, you remember. “We need some muscular Christianity!” and I think there was already a sense that the Christianity of the late nineteenth century had been somewhat feminized, and that there needed to be a vigorous masculine expression of the Christian life and of the Christian faith. And so there was a looking for guys like Maltbie Babcock or Eric Liddell or others who are normal men. They're not just normal men — some of them are extraordinary athletes and such — but they were also very, very committed Christians. You can see how that might be appealing to young people. But it is a very adult hymn in that regard. Let's listen to it.

Dr. Wymond: Singing *This Is My Father's World* this morning will be Victor Smith. This is “Hymns of the Faith,” brought to you by Jackson's First Presbyterian Church.

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This is my Father's world: the battle is not done;
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