

“Why didn’t Jesus come as a woman?” asked my daughter

## **I didn’t know how to answer, but I do know that the gendering of God has real-world consequences.**

by [Debie Thomas](#) in the [January 27, 2021](#) issue



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First, three recent snapshots from my life.

One evening this fall, my college-aged daughter looked up from her homework and asked, “If God really cares about expressing solidarity with the least powerful, most oppressed people in the world, why didn’t Jesus come as a woman?”

When I told my spiritual director that I’m struggling to pray, she gave me a song: Bobby McFerrin’s “The 23rd Psalm.” In it, the shepherd is female, and every male pronoun has been changed accordingly: “She restores my soul. . . . She sets a table before me.” Months later, I have to be careful where I listen to these lyrics. Every time I do, I burst into tears.

The night the presidential election was finally called, my daughter came to me, her eyes shining, a huge smile on her face, and a picture of Kamala Harris emblazoned on her iPhone screen. “Mommy,” she said, with pride and wonder in her voice. “She looks like us! She is *one of us!*”

Like many people, I grew up with an exclusively male God. While my childhood pastors insisted that God is genderless—God is Spirit; God has no genitalia; God exceeds all human descriptors—such runarounds had zero impact on me as a child and young woman because they ignored the power of language to construct and consolidate reality. They dismissed the shaping influence of sermons, Bible stories, and hymns in which God was always and only “he.” The effect wasn’t simply intellectual. This was a God I took into my bones and enthroned in my unconscious.

This gendering of course had real-world consequences. No female clergy. No women in church leadership. No place to ask risky questions about correlations: between God as male and my church’s ambivalence around exposing abuse, between the church’s male-centeredness and its lack of collective will to fight on behalf of suffering girls and women at home and abroad, between the language that flowed from the pulpit and the shame women internalized around their bodies, sexualities, and spiritualities.

I was well into my thirties before I heard a woman preach. It’s only in the last few years that I’ve seen women wearing vestments, pronouncing absolution, or presiding over the Eucharist. I didn’t know until recently that *ruach*, the God-Spirit who hovers over the unformed earth in Genesis 1:2, is feminine. I didn’t know about Sophia (Prov. 8:22), or God panting in childbirth (Isa. 42:14), or God the ferocious she-bear (Hosea 13:8), or God the midwife (Ps. 22:9–10), or Jesus the mother hen (Matt. 23:37). I’m only now uncovering the imagery and language of recognition, mirroring, and belonging that men in the church take for granted.

But private discoveries are one thing; the public witness of the church is another. Just as my daughter recognized herself in the historic election of America’s first female, Black, and Indian-American vice president, I long to recognize myself in the God-language of the church. I yearn to belong directly, not by extension or secondhand. As in: “It’s God! She looks like us! She is *one of us!*”

I no longer attend a church that reserves the priesthood for men, or discourages women from exercising their spiritual gifts and callings, or insists on male-only

descriptions for God. This is a tremendous gift, and I don't take it for granted. Yet I worry that we who attend egalitarian churches will assume our work is finished. I fear that in our enlightened bubbles we will forget that for many women, these questions of justice, inclusion, empowerment, and belonging still sear and burn.

These days, I pay attention with both interest and anxiety as progressive churches debate the relative merits of gender-neutral and gender-expansive language. These debates exceed politics and academia; they're inextricably linked to loss and trauma, needs and hungers. Neutrality can't provide what Bobby McFerrin's reimagined shepherd provides each time I think of her. Though I understand the theological questions at stake, I fear that neutrality will never be fierce, loving, robust, hospitable, and generative enough for a God who cried at Lazarus's tomb, washed dusty feet, and received the ardent caresses of the woman who dared to pour perfume over God's head.

Maybe what I'm looking for is a space within church and liturgy to lament, to grieve and rage, to name what has been lost and can't be recovered. I can't get my childhood back. I can't unmake the male God the church formed in me before I even had the tools to comprehend what was happening. I can't find my way to a God who is bigger, richer, deeper, and wider than the male deity I inherited. I need the church to help me, to endorse language that's different from what I was given and to walk with me as I learn to navigate the world in that new tongue.

I'm still sitting with the question my daughter asked me about Jesus. Why was Jesus a man? I don't know. But I wonder if the question would resonate differently, signify differently, *sting* differently, if the church would wrap it in language as radically welcoming as my daughter needs. As in: "Sweetheart, we don't know why God didn't send us a daughter. But she is still our wise Mother and our loving Father. He is a God who births only what is beautiful. She is Sofia, the very fountain of wisdom, and we can trust her. Ours is a Mother who knows what she's doing."

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