

## STEWARDSHIP OF CREATION, or WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE OUGHT WE TO BE?

*the Rev. Dr. DeWayne L. Davis*  
Lead Minister

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**Text: 2 Peter 3:11b–13**

In this season of Easter, we have been reflecting with you on what stewardship looks like in light of the resurrection. If indeed resurrection portends the unfolding of the new thing that God intends for the world, how do the faithful project that newness into the world? If indeed resurrection is the inevitable culmination of God's covenant loyalty to God's faithful ones, how is covenant lived out in ways that reflect resurrection from the shadow and depths of death? If we take resurrection seriously and it remains a part of our witness and proclamation to the world, then what kind of people ought we to be?

These are some of the issues with which the writer of the Second Letter of Peter wrestles. Biblical scholars maintain that 2 Peter ranks among the least-read books of the Bible, and yet, ironically, it also is one of those books that invites a deep focus on the fate of the world. This writer takes seriously an eschatology that expects God to judge the world and punish the unjust through the destruction of this old world and anticipates the creation of new heavens and a new earth. The writer wants to know how God's faithful ones will conform their lives, their actions, and their existence now to reflect that newness, that just ordering of the world that God promises. And so 2 Peter is written to a people in denial about the passing away of this world, as if God has no intention of making all things new. 2 Peter is a word to a people who are acting as if the world will go on as it is without end and without them having to change, grow, or move.

Without getting mired in the problematic theology of this eschatological approach, doesn't this sound a lot like people in our own time who are in denial about global temperature rise or those who believe that we can go on exploiting the earth's resources without end? I take this passage as an invitation to reflect on what stewardship of creation looks like when we know that the earth is warming at the fastest rate ever due to carbon dioxide emissions from human activity. We are on firmer ground predicting the destruction of the earth scientifically rather than theologically. Peter invites us to reflect on what is required of us when the earth strains and struggles under our determined dominion over it. What kind of people ought we to be when the way the world is remains unsustainable?

So, I want to lift this text out of its context and retain its theme about the response of the faithful to the reality of a world we know is passing away. I want us to sit with the timeliness and universality of the question Peter poses in light of destruction of the world: "What kind of people ought we to be?" When we know what we know about what is happening to us—to our climate, to our earth, to our oceans, to our plants and animals, to our bodies—because of our reliance on fossil fuels and our relentless exploitation of our natural resources, what kind of people ought we to be? This is not an invitation to moralistic browbeating or virtue signaling. This is an invitation to think about our relationship to God, who created all things and called it good, and what it would mean to take care of this good creation God entrusted to us.

In a world and economy riven by division, ideology, and competition, the one area where there has been surprising, consistent unanimity has been in the exploitation of the earth for our comfort, progress, and

profit. In a world marked by religious traditions of varying kinds, the one theological convention that has captured the human imagination has been human dominion over the creation. Because of this understanding, we have reached heights of wealth, scientific knowledge, and military and technological advancements through our extraction and exploitation of the earth. And now the earth cries out in distress, her doom and destruction on display in the verifiable warming oceans, shrinking arctic ice sheets, retreating glaciers, rising sea levels, and decreasing snow cover. The creation weeps at the seven million premature deaths every year due to polluted air. Where are the stewards of creation? What kind of people ought we to be?

And yet, in all of the ways our behavior precipitates a heating and destruction of the earth, we also know that it is within our human power to be healers of the earth, to be participants in the creation of that new heaven and new earth. In the vocation of stewardship, in the calling on us to co-create with God what is good, we can turn the tide through our own actions. That is the grace inherent in this question of what kind of people ought we to be: we are empowered, we are graced, we are welcomed to co-create the new heavens and the new earth. We are invited to be in relationship with God, who is in relationship with the good creation.

I suspect we know more than we are willing to admit what it means to be good stewards of all that God has given us. Different choices and new behaviors can go a long way in helping to restore the earth. We can reduce our footprint by conserving energy, reducing our use of water and fossil fuels, and recycling and reusing as much as we can. God's loving act of creation invites us to take seriously our role as stewards, honoring, respecting, and caring for what God so lovingly created and so generously shares with us. What kind of people ought we to be?

Through their testimonies throughout the Bible, our spiritual forebears have made it abundantly clear that creation is the inevitable result of God's steadfast love. The psalmists make clear that all creation—the water; the valleys and the hills; the wild animals and the birds; the grass and the plants; the wine, the bread, and the oil—is a reflection of God's love and wisdom. What God has created here works and makes sense and is beautiful and is generative. God has entrusted us to tend and care for it and protect what God so lovingly and generously created. In God's wisdom, God provides for us with water, food, habitat, and seasons, and time. There is a divine ecological purpose and ecological process engineered for sustaining life, not as a scientific reality or economic proposition, but as a spiritual and theological truth. It is all gift. What kind of people ought we to be who have been given this gift?

Our Climate and Environmental Justice Committee has faithfully modeled for us what it means to wrestle with the meaning and practice of stewardship of creation. I am so grateful to them for raising the questions, imagining the possibilities, and inviting us to offset our use of carbon as a way of becoming better, more conscious stewards. They invite us through their work and witness to reflect on how we can be better stewards of the gift of creation.

I must say as I close, I hope we do not see stewardship of creation as solely about environmental matters. This stewardship of creation encompasses God's entrusting us with love of neighbor. On Tuesday, the former police officer Derek Chauvin was found guilty on all charges in the murder of George Floyd. We all exhaled in relief, and yet, nearly every person expressed their understanding that more work lies ahead. And the question that accompanies the vocation of stewardship rings out for us to confront. What kind of people ought we to be when our neighbors are killed by police because those neighbors are Black or because of where those neighbors live? What kind of neighbor ought we to be to each other when inequality and oppression abound? How will we tend to the health and welfare of our neighbor? A new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home, await us. May we steward them faithfully.