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## *Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Place*

*This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.*

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Dear Anna,

I'm looking forward to your visit this summer. I hope you will be able to meet Nathan and Hannah while you're here.

Have I ever told you about how Nathan became a farmer?

He was teaching religion at a local college. He became interested in how much the Hebrew scriptures talk about the land, and how to care for it, and the plants and animals that live on it. As he puts it, he began to wonder more about where he was than why he was there.

Annie Dillard says the same thing in her book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. She reports a woman as saying to her, "Some unwonted, taught pride diverts us from our original intent, which is to explore the neighborhood, view the landscape, to discover where it is that we have been so startlingly set down, even if we can't learn why."

At the time, the debate about climate change was growing louder and some critics were blaming Christianity for encouraging the destruction of the environment. The first creation story in Genesis has God giving people "dominion" over all of the animals, and instructing them to "subdue" the earth. The second creation story has God putting people in charge of the garden in which they live.

I don't think that Nathan ever really thought that Christian theology was the problem. The air quality in Los Angeles isn't any worse than in Singapore, and the land use policies in the Midwest aren't any more destructive than in China. Nathan did think, though, that Christian theology might be part of the answer.

He and Hannah rented a house in the country and decided that they would grow as much of their own food as they could.

Learning to grow their own food, or at least more of it, led Nathan to a conversion of sorts. The more he understood about the fragility of the earth and the economic impact of increasing climate volatility, the more he began to understand dominion and subdue as meaning stewardship and service. And, this turn led him to focus more on sustainability and creation care.

I have Nathan to thank for several things. First, I have never fantasized about being a farmer; it's hard work! But, second, Nathan reminded me that living well really is all about relationships, not only with the people around us, but also with the land.

Perhaps most importantly, though, Nathan taught me that doing the right thing could taste good too!

Your affectionate uncle,  
Ames

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