Bala's moving words have invited us to think about our Earth's many beautiful waterways. Today I'd also like to explore with you the ways we live in relationship to water as it moves through our lives and gives us — and every other living thing — the gift of life.

Psalm 24 tells us:

"The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters." (Psalm 24:1–2)

God's creation includes every river, stream, spring, wetland, lake, aquifer, and ocean. It includes rain falling on the roof, dew resting on the grass, snow gathering in the mountains, and the water flowing from our faucets. You will see some photos on the screen contributed by members of our creation care team. Perhaps they will remind you of a time when you were awestruck by the beauty of a waterway you have had the privilege to witness.

Waterways reveal God's beauty. And water sustains all life. We have this awesome gift that we freely enjoy without having done anything to deserve it. If we come from a place of profound gratitude, the question naturally arises in us: what does God desire our relationship with water to be?

Water in Scripture

Scripture gives us an understanding of that relationship throughout the Bible. Beginning in Genesis, water is woven into the story of creation. Water is lifted up as a means of blessing, cleansing, renewal, and healing. In baptism, water becomes a sign of God's grace — freely given, not earned.

Water is such a powerful spiritual image in Scripture. When Jesus speaks with the Samaritan woman at the well, he uses water as a metaphor for something deeper. He speaks of living water — the life that comes from God and satisfies a spiritual thirst that physical water cannot satisfy. Jesus is not dismissing the need for actual physical water; quite the opposite. He teaches us to see physical water with greater reverence by offering it as a representation of God's living water, which gives us spiritual renewal.

Since we know that water sustains life, then we must ask: are our lives bringing life to the waters around us, or are we diminishing its life-giving properties through our need for convenience and consumption — resulting in overdrawing, contamination, inequitable access, wasted water, and damage to ecosystems and the life that depends on them?

Stewards, Not Owners

The verses we read today in Genesis tell us that humanity was placed in the garden to care for it, to tend it. We are participants in creation, not masters of it. We are stewards, not owners without limits. And water is one of the most urgent aspects of creation for us to exercise this God-given responsibility.

Water comes to us in our industrialized society with remarkable ease — in what we drink, the food we prepare, the hands we wash, the showers we take, the homes we clean. We turn a handle and there it is. That extraordinary convenience can also become a spiritual problem. When something is always available, we can forget that it is a gift. We can forget where it comes from. We can forget how many living things depend upon it. And we can forget God.

If we lose access to water — such as when pipes freeze — we become more aware of this gift, and we feel a renewed sense of gratitude when water is restored. Water isn't easily accessible in some parts of the world. There are people who need to walk long distances to obtain their water each day. In our area, we are blessed with an abundance of this resource, so it can be easy to take it for granted. We need to remember that our stewardship of our local water is important, as it also supplies people and ecosystems downstream of us.

Clean, accessible water is a matter of health. It is a matter of justice. It is a matter of compassion. And ultimately, it is a matter of love of neighbor.

Water as This Year's Theme

Our creation care team has chosen this year to lift up the care of Earth's water as our primary theme. We see water as essential to the health and welfare of our own lives, to the lives of our human and animal neighbors, and to the balance of the ecosystems upon which all life on Earth depends.

So what might it mean for each of us to steward God's gift of water? While any action we take to care for water will be a worthy endeavor, perhaps true stewardship begins not with what we do, but with what we notice.

We can make water a subject of our prayer life, and in doing so, cultivate ongoing gratitude:

- When we drink a glass of water, we can pause and give thanks.
- When we eat a meal, we can remember the sources and people that made it possible.
- When we see a river, lake, or stream, we can ask what it needs from us.

- When we turn on a faucet, we can remember that this is a gift flowing through creation and into our hands.

We are invited to notice, to give thanks, to become more aware. And then, if we feel that tug in our hearts to make a particular change in our behavior toward better stewardship of water, we are fortunate as Christians that we can call on the Holy Spirit for sanctifying grace to help us be willing and able to take that right action.

Three Areas of Stewardship: Home, Food, and Community

In our homes, we can attend to leaks, avoid running water too long, and purchase and use appliances with greater efficiency. We can consider ways to conserve water when caring for our lawns and other landscaping.

When choosing food, there is no single faithful diet for everyone. We do not all have the same health needs, budgets, cultures, or access to food — but we can make thoughtful choices. For example, plant foods tend to require less water to produce than animal foods, though there are some exceptions.

In our communities, we can support public investment in safe drinking water, wastewater treatment, stormwater management, wetlands, and watershed protection. We can also ask our elected officials, public utilities, and businesses:

- Who has access to our water?
- How much water is being used?
- What protections are in place for households, farms, and wildlife impacted by our water locally and downstream?
- How are we planning for the continuation of clean and ample water resources for future generations?

And we can pay special attention to people and communities most vulnerable to water insecurity — those with fewer resources, failing infrastructure, or less political power.

An Invitation

We do not need to do everything at once. The creation care team invites you to pray and see if a personal calling to steward water is laid on your heart. And if so moved, you may write this calling on a paper rock and place it in the river, which is represented on the gray matters table between the sanctuary and the Embry Room. This can be a way of sharing your commitment with other members of the congregation and receiving loving support and encouragement.

This is not about shaming one another — or ourselves — or creating a list of burdensome obligations when we may already feel overwhelmed. We will respond to these challenges more effectively when we are motivated by love rather than guilt, by wonder rather than shame, and by gratitude rather than obligation.

Closing

God has given us water freely. Perhaps our most faithful response is to consciously and gratefully receive the gift of water, even when we do something so ordinary and routine as turning on the tap.

May our hearts be opened to give God praise and thanks for water. And then, with the grace of the Holy Spirit, may we become people who help ensure that this gift remains available to our neighbors, our communities, the creatures and plant life with whom we share this Earth, and to the generations yet to come.

Amen.