

David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life after Warming*, Tim Duggan Books, New York, 2019. 320 pp. \$27.00. ISBN: 978-0-52557-670-9.

The Uninhabitable Earth by journalist David Wallace-Wells is a book no one wants to read. I bought a copy, then left it sitting on my desk for months. Each time I glanced at the book's stark title, I felt a lurch in my stomach. I piled other books on top of it and tried to think of other things.

The Uninhabitable Earth is a painstakingly researched and elegantly written book about a terrifying subject—the ecological crisis that encompasses our entire planet and threatens the future of human civilization. It includes sixty-five pages of end-notes and is based on the most rigorous and widely corroborated science about the state of the planet we live on. To call it apocalyptic would be fair. To call it frightening would be accurate. But it is neither reckless nor exaggerated. It is a clear and ringing call to action, and one that people of faith urgently need to hear. Once I mustered the courage to read the book, I found it grounded in a belief that human beings have the capacity to make the radical changes to our economy, politics, land use, and energy systems that will be necessary to avoid the complete degradation of the ecosystems we depend on for our survival.

The Uninhabitable Earth catalogues a cascade of consequences that have already begun and will only get worse as our planet continues to warm: rising seas that swallow cities, deadly heat waves, desertification, crop failure, dying oceans, an overwhelming rise in climate refugees, spreading pandemics, toxic air, economic collapse, and psychological despair. In my lifetime, humans have wiped out 40 percent of the wildlife on the planet, driven a million species of animals and plants to the brink of extinction, and burned enough fossil fuels to heat our planet more than 1 degree Celsius from preindustrial levels. We will soon reach 1.5 degrees higher, the threshold set by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) beyond which the catastrophes will really begin to compound, potentially triggering a domino effect of events such as thawing permafrost, melting arctic ice caps, and burning forests that feed into the heating cycle. Beyond 1.5 degrees lies a hellscape of even worse scenarios, the upper limits of which do indeed threaten the habitability of our planet.

And yet, beneath these grim facts, I encountered a current of optimism that pulled me toward action rather than despair. A single generation has brought us to the “brink of catastrophe,” Wallace-Wells writes. Avoiding that catastrophe belongs to another generation: ours. To do so, we must swiftly overhaul our economy, politics, agriculture, diets, and energy systems in a global effort that the IPCC has compared to the mobilization of World War II. The good news is that many of the technological tools necessary to transform to a low-carbon society already exist, and political maps for that transition have already been developed. Germany, for instance, has initiated a plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 95 percent of

1990 levels by 2050. In the United States, climate activists and members of congress have proposed a Green New Deal, an ambitious blueprint to bring the economy to zero emissions in ten years while reducing inequality and creating millions of green jobs. A version of the Green New Deal is being created in Canada as well.

We know what needs to be done, and we have the tools to do it. What's lacking is the political will; here is work for people of faith. It isn't enough for us to make ethical choices in our personal lives. Wallace-Wells makes it clear that we're well past the point where individual consumption choices will make much of a difference unless they're accompanied by robust policy change and government regulation.

Imagine if people of faith across North America took up the climate crisis and the ecological degradation of our planet as the most urgent moral issue of our time. Imagine if we expanded our theology to include our relationship with the ecosystems upon which we depend. Imagine if climate change was mentioned from the pulpit in every church and synagogue and mosque and temple. Imagine if Sunday school classes invited climate scientists and green energy wonks to speak to them. Imagine if people of faith phoned their political representatives, made banners, and marched in the streets demanding a just transition to a low-carbon economy.

People of faith have done things like this before. During the abolition of slavery movement in Britain during the late 1700s and early 1800s, Christian apologists framed slavery as a moral and spiritual issue. Pastors preached compassion for the suffering of others and stirred up moral outrage among their congregations. Quakers created a network of activist communities across Britain that researched conditions of slave ships, published pamphlets, engaged in street theater, circulated petitions, lobbied parliament, and boycotted sugar. These actions did not make them popular; the movement threatened an economy that depended on the labor of enslaved people.

Climate change is the justice issue of our time—a crisis created largely by the most prosperous people on the planet, with its catastrophes borne—so far—by the poorest and those least responsible for its creation. But it is quickly becoming a matter of survival for all of us, rich and poor alike. We are characters in the most consequential story in human history, Wallace-Wells tells us. How it ends will be up to us.

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