This week an estimate of more than 1.4 billion people around the world celebrated the arrival of the Lunar New Year. As you probably know by now, this year is the Year of the Dog! The Dog symbolizes docile obedience, humility and faithfulness.

Now keep in mind that the Lunar New Year is not just for the Chinese but it is widely celebrated among other ethnic groups and countries all around Asia as well. And besides who’s to say that you have to be Asian in order to celebrate the Lunar New Year? It has, however, become a global and cross-cultural phenomenon, especially in a diverse world that we live in today.

As you know there are many customs and traditions that people practice during the celebration of the Lunar New Year. One of these traditions was the cleaning around the house on the 28th day of the last month, right before the arrival of the new year. Traditionally people would vacuum, clean the floor, the bathrooms, the kitchen, windows or simply declutter any of the messes around the house. Because it’s not good to be messy, clutter, and sloppy, anywhere or anytime, not just during the new year.

I remember when I was a kid growing up in Hong Kong, my mom would assign me and my sister to do household cleaning chores right before the new year. My mom would give us these chicken feather dusters to clean off any dusts around the edges of window or various places around the house, and we also used newspaper to clean the window to make sure everything looks clean and shiny. For some reason, I actually enjoyed doing these chores because I thought it was fun. I remember at the end of our cleaning to our amazement, the wet cloths would become totally black because of all the dust and dirt we don’t normally see with our eyes.

To this day, many families still follow this tradition of housecleaning right before the new year. The removal of dirt and dust is symbolic of us getting rid of the “negative” things that happened in our lives in the past year and to start off the new year with a clean slate. When we declutter things, we make space for something else to take hold in our lives. We need to put all of these behind us in order to start the new year right!

Ironically this year’s cleaning day fell also on Ash Wednesday of the church calendar. Ash Wednesday, as you know, marked the beginning of the season of Lent - which is a season of **preparation**, **meditation** and **reflection** leading up to the Holy Week of Palm Sunday, Good Friday and eventually Resurrection Sunday. The more I think about it, I think it is thematically appropriate that both of these traditions fall on the same day. They do have a lot in comment, as we look into our past and looking ahead into our future.

On Ash Wednesday, we are reminded that we ARE made of dust and ashes…and as dust and ashes we will eventually return. These dust and ashes also symbolizes the impurities and sins in our lives that we also need to get rid of, especially during this Lenten season. It is a time of self-examination and kicking out of our old habits and begin a new journey.

The season of Lent also reminds us that we are never alone along this life-long journey. We acknowledge that we are frail and vulnerable to various forms of temptations, and shamefully falling out of God’s grace. We must confess and repent and plead upon God’s mercy and forgiveness.

Furthermore, these 40 days of Lent signify the journey that Jesus took while in the wilderness, immediately after his baptism. Throughout this season, Christians are invited to reflect on our own spiritual journey and our relationship with Christ. We are invited to slow things down, or hit the “Pause” button in anticipation of what is to come. We must not look too far onto Easter, without remembering the sacrifice of Christ on our behalf and the trails and “testings” that we must endure every day. **Lent invites us to do just that…to slow our pace down and to reflect upon our relationship with our God. We’re in this journey together for the long haul.**

According to our belief, our baptism serves as the ***“Sign and Seal”*** of God’s invisible grace and eternal covenant that was established between God and us. **Like the ashes that many Christians received on Ash Wednesday, symbolize our old and sinful selves, the water of our baptism serve as a sign of new life and a new beginning that can only be found through Christ.**

Through our baptism, we are marked by the sign of water and claimed by God as God’s own sons and daughters. Our baptism is not just a washing of dusts and dirt off our bodies[[1]](#footnote-1), but it is a spiritual cleansing that prepares and equips us to go on this long journey out in the “wilderness”.

Scripture reminded us that we must **“*Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.*[[2]](#footnote-2)** When we are out in the wilderness of the world that we live, we are almost certain that our faith WILL be tested day in and day out. We WILL be tempted of falling into sins, especially when we are in the most vulnerable position, when we are lonely, depressed, or when we feel abandoned or betrayed by others.

God reassured us of the covenant that was made to all of God’s people, that no matter what trials that life may bring, no matter what “dirt” that we have accumulated in our lives, for as long as we humbly come before God through our contrite spirit of repentance, God will deliver his mercy and forgiveness in our lives. God will grant us peace and lift up our burdens. As Jesus said, ***“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."[[3]](#footnote-3)***

In the Old Testament lesson that we read earlier from the book of Genesis, we also see another sign of God’s covenant at work with Noah and his family. The catastrophic flood did more than just wiping out almost the entire human population and all of the living things known at the time. It was a spiritual awakening and a stern warning of God’s power and mercy. As painful as it may seem, God was willing to “give up” what was tainted and corrupted in this world due to our human sins. God was willing to hit the “reset” button on humanity and creation with a clean slate, but this time with a renewed sign of the covenant. ONLY those who are faithful and obedient to Him would be saved, as long as we come before God, repenting and confessing our sins.

In the same way, during this season of Lent, God is reaching out to us to renew our covenant once again, through our signs of repentance and confession. There are enough evils in this world, as we have witnessed yet again this past week through another human tragedy at the mass shooting down in Florida. God grieves alongside with us and amongst those who have lost loved ones when innocent lives are being claimed due to our own human failure and neglect. Shamefully some of us look the other ways while only offer our “thoughts and prayers” without taking actions and ownership of our sins. We’ve failed against our human compassion and justice of this world, while serving our own interests over the interests of others and pretend nothing has happened and we should go about our own casual ways.

We as a human race, have failed to uphold our covenant in valuing life that is entrusted in us. Together we must come before God confessing the sins of humanity, while taking for granted of lives that are being innocently cut short. Lord, have mercy on us.

Friends, it is our hope and our prayer that throughout these 40 days and 40 nights that we may seek Christ first above all things. We must prioritize and choose what is right that we must keep and what is wrong that we must throw out and declutter in our lives. Are we willing to be bold and take a courageous step in accepting that challenge on this day?

**Through God’s covenantal grace and love, we are reminded that we are frail, we are human. We do falter and fall short of God’s glory. From dust we are formed and to dust we shall return, but God’s covenant towards us shall remain steadfast forever.**

This is the Good News and our greatest hope in Jesus Christ. May we be reconnected and reconciled with God once again, as we remove our dirt and recalculate our steps throughout our Lenten spiritual journey.To God be all glory, honor and praise. In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. *I Peter 3:18-22* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *1 Peter 5:8* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Matthew 11:28-30* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)