Today is the First Sunday of Lent. Just a few days ago on Ash Wednesday we were signed with ashes – the black carbon remains of the palm branches from the last year’s Palm Sunday. As we were signed with a black carbon palm ash cross – we heard the words: “Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel” or, “Remember, you are dust and to dust you will return.” Thus began our Lenten journey - words, symbols, and actions: the holy, the earthly, the bodily – joined as one, made sacramental. What a powerful reminder of the fullness of life that is ours through God’s covenantal love! Yet – even as we begin our journey for these next forty days – it’s easy to resort to the same old practices, in the same old ways of our childhood, and neglect today’s realities and challenges that call for profound and deep conversion of all of us.

Lent calls us to devote ourselves to seeking the Lord in prayer and Scripture, to service by giving alms, and to sacrifice, self-control through fasting. But do we ever, for example, ask ourselves – ‘Why, in the wealthiest nation in the world – we still need to have a special season to “give alms?”’ St. John Chrysostom reminds us: "Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life. The goods we possess are not ours, but theirs.” The key to fruitful observance of Lenten practices is to recognize their link to our Baptism. We are not called to just abstain from sin during Lent, but to true conversion of our hearts and minds as followers of Christ. We recall those waters in which we were baptized into Christ's death, died to sin and evil, and began new life in Christ.

In today’s first reading, we hear about God’s covenant with Noah, and in the Gospel, we hear about Jesus's journey into the desert. Have we ever really heard and taken to heart that part of God’s covenant that was made, not only with us humans, but with “every living creature …: all the birds, and the various tame and wild animals …?” And, not only that, but have we understood that the rainbow the sign was not just a pretty atmospheric display, but a sign “for all ages to come, of the covenant between me and you and every living creature with you: … a sign of the covenant between me and the earth?” Have we valued and respected those relationships with our other-than-human sisters and brothers, and the earth itself - our common home? Does our neglect have anything to do with the fact that 2017 was a record-breaking year for wildfires, hurricanes, tornadoes, floods and other disasters across the nation, costing $306.2 billion in damage? Or – that globally, according to the UN Food and Agricultural Organization, poor and hungry people are the most affected by natural disasters and weather variability? Or – that in 2016, 815 million people were affected by such disasters - up from 777 million in 2015

Are we conscious of the fact that ten years ago - in March 2008, the Vatican’s Apostolic Penitentiary listed “ecological offenses” as among the “forms of social sins?” Have you ever calculated your carbon footprint and discovered (like most Americans) that you are responsible for ten times the amount of CO₂ spewed into the atmosphere, or that you consume about a hundred times the amount of fresh H₂O as a person in Mozambique? Has it ever occurred to you to bring these realities – common to many of us – to the Sacrament of Reconciliation?

Pope Francis puts it this way in Laudato Si’ – On the Care for Our Common Home, §139:

When we speak of the “environment,” what we really mean is a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it. Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it. . . . We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.
Connecting our Lenten observances to ecological issues may seem rather strange, at first. Yet, if we allow ourselves the benefit of prayerful reflection on how interdependent we are with the earth and our fellow creatures, the connections quickly come clear. We cannot love what we do not know, and we will not care for and defend what we do not love. With the psalmist, we must open ourselves to learn God’s ways of truth, compassion, kindness, humility, and justice (Ps 25:4-5, 6-7,8-9).

In today’s Gospel we find Jesus in the desert, alone. He often withdrew from the crowds to commune with his “Abba.” He immersed himself in natural out-of-doors settings for prayer and reflection - deserts, hilltops, beaches, or gardens (Luke 6:12 and Mark 1:15-35). It was there that he learned what his teaching shows us - a radically relational God (Abba) who loves all of creation unconditionally, with grace, compassion, and tender mercy. Indeed, all creation is loved by God and is revelatory of God. Jesus admonished that we must love our neighbor as ourselves. But he also showed us that we need to love as God loves—and that includes our “ecological neighbors,” those who live downwind and downstream from us!6 This profound way of knowing God enabled him to resist and overcome Satan’s wiles. Following his example, we can learn to do the same!

A wonderful story from Midrash Tanhuma, Parashat Noach,7 depicts a conversation between God and Noah:

When Noah came out of the Ark, he opened his eyes and saw the whole world completely destroyed. He began crying for the world and said:

“God – how could you have done this!??”
God replied –
“Oh Noah, how different you are from the way Abraham will be. . . .”
“He will argue with me on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah, when I tell him that I plan their destruction. . . .”
“But you, Noah – When I told you I would destroy the entire world, I lingered and delayed, so that you would speak on behalf of the world.”
“But when you knew that you would be safe in the ark, that the evil of the world would not touch you . . . .”
“You thought of no one but your family . . . And – now you complain!??”

Then - Noah knew – he had sinned!

Certainly this story comes from a very different era than ours. Yet, I think it illustrates how easy it is for us to lose track of our responsibilities and connections with our sisters and brothers across the globe – our fellow humans, animals, plants, the air, water, soils and other earth elements. There are so many ways we have become distracted from these very important relationships. But – deep down we know – none of us can live without drinkable water, clean air, or good soil for growing food.

Though it’s not always apparent – everything on the planet is related with everything else – the cities, the forests, the oceans, the air...everything! When something happens to one – it affects everyone and everything – nearby and far away – a smoking factory, a contaminated stream, a strip-mined mountain – everything and everyone around it suffers, and our most vulnerable neighbors suffers the most. Noah’s sin was not that he cared for his family. Rather, it was that he did not also care for them in relationship with everyone and everything else!

In Laudato Si’ Pope Francis calls us to “ecological conversion” - to take time to reflect on the many ways you and I are deeply and profoundly connected to everything and everyone else. Daily - you and I need to value and treat each and every one of our fellow creatures – in the same loving and respectful way – that God values and treats us. Caring for God’s creation, as God cares for us will – no doubt – require each of us to change what we do to use up more than our fair share of God’s many gifts. Pope Francis calls everyone to a lifestyle rooted in integral ecology – a world view and a way of thinking, being, and acting that recognizes that, everything is related to everything else.
Both the universal flood in the story of Noah and Jesus's journey into the desert lasted 40 days. In these 40 days of Lent, let this be our prayer:

Sovereign of the universe, your first covenant of mercy was with every living creature. When your beloved Son came among us, the waters of the river welcomed him, the heavens opened to greet his arrival, the beasts of the wilderness drew near as his companions. Washed into new life through baptism, lead us and all people in the way of your new creation, the way of mercy, justice and peace.

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Some Resources

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS FOR LENT 2017 “The Word is a gift. Other persons are a gift”


Laudato Si’ 2018 - ecospirituality resources
Scripture excerpts are from the Sunday readings for Lent 2018, but they and this resource can be used any time during the year.

Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur 2018 Lenten Campaign Resources – *Laudato Si’* and Care for Creation