

Lent 2 Year A March 5 2023 John 3 1-17

A few years ago, I came across a story that caught my eye. A woman made a post on Facebook, along with some pictures.

It read “I’ve had this beautiful succulent for about 2 years now. I was so proud of this plant. It was full, beautiful coloring, just an overall perfect plant. I had it up in my kitchen window. I had a watering plan for it. If someone else tried to water my succulent I would get so defensive, because I just wanted to keep good care of it. I absolutely loved my succulent. Today I decided it was time to transplant. I found the cutest vase that suited it perfectly. I went to pull it from the original plastic container it was purchased with, to learn this plant was FAKE. I put so much love into this plant! I washed its leaves. Tried my hardest to keep it looking it’s best, and its completely plastic! How did I not know this? I pull it from the container, it’s sitting on Styrofoam, with sand glued to the top! I feel like these last two years have been a lie.”

Maybe you came across this story a few years ago as well. There are two pictures that accompany this post. In the first picture, it does indeed look like a perfect plant. In the second, the woman has peeled away the container to reveal Styrofoam and its glued-on sand.

It’s a funny story. I think people began sending her real succulent plants once news outlets picked up the story.

It tickles me, because I have a black thumb.

I don't know just how many good intentioned people have given me houseplants over the years. I have to stop myself from saying, "Thank you, but this will be dead in a few months."

I can't help it. I either water them too much, or not enough.

They either get too much sun or not enough.

Usually, a combination of all of these tends to lead to the plant's ultimate demise.

But it was more than the humor of the story that stuck with me. There was another quality about it that kept rattling around in my head.

Maybe it is because we are in the early weeks of Lent that has me thinking of it again.

There was something in the image of cherishing and nurturing something – only to find out it was fake all along. All that hard work and effort was put into something that did not need it at all.

I don't have any plastic plants at home that I water, but, if I am being honest with myself, I have countless things in my life that are fake, that are hollow and shallow, that garner much too much of my time and attention.

That is one of the gifts of this holy season of Lent. To take sober stock of ourselves and our lives.

I know we all have our own disciplines for this season. Taking on certain things, giving up others. Each of these helps us to focus, and start to see those things which are like that fake plant. That we spend so much care and attention on, but underneath, they are not living at all.

Maybe you take a fast from social media during Lent. Or, significantly limit your screen time for these weeks. When you do that, you might first be shocked at just how much time you normally spend staring in to a computer, phone, or TV screen. You might be shocked to step back and discover how much of your interaction with the world, with other people, comes through the middleman of technology. You have to ask, how real is this, and why do I spend so much time nurturing it?

Maybe you take on extra reading and prayer during these weeks. Picking up that book about faith that has been sitting on the bedside table. Or carving out regular times during the day to pray – not when it is convenient, but pausing and centering yourself on prayer.

Soon you might be shocked to discover how good it feels to spend that time learning about our faith. Learning what has been gifted to us by the Church, and

what it means for us today. How good it feels to pray, not as an afterthought, but as your first thought.

You might start to wonder, what exactly is keeping me from doing this all the time? Why am I not nurturing this, giving these things the attention they need?

The countless ways you have spent your Lents, and the things you have taken on or given up for this Lent, help us to see more clearly the rich, vibrant, alive things around us; and to identify those things which are fake, sterile, and devoid of life.

Our Gospel reading contains two sentences that are anything but fake, hollow, and shallow. These sentences contain such rich truth, such liberating and freeing Grace, that we should think about them daily.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

We should sit with these two sentences every day. We should take the time to pay attention to them – to water and nourish them in our hearts

God’s Son came into this world, for everyone, for you.

Lived and breathed, and died, and rose again, for you, so that you might have a life bursting with the Grace of God.

God's Son, came into this world, not to damn it, to cast it down; but to rescue it, to lift it up out of the darkness of sin and death.

Anything that distracts you from this truth. Anything that tries to convince you that it is not true; is like that beautiful but fake plastic plant. The world will try to give you other things to put your hope and trust in, and you can give those false claims all the attention you have. You can nourish them. And all they will do is take, and take, and take... and give nothing back.

But accepting into your life Jesus Christ, and accepting the world-altering truth that he came for you, for all of us, to save this world – nourish that in your heart, and it will give onto you grace upon grace, peace upon peace, love upon love.

If there is one thing you take away with you this Lent, or from any Sunday here at Good Shepherd, let it be this.

You are a beloved child of God.

So beloved that a son was given for you.

A son was sacrificed for you.

A son was raised so that you can taste eternal life.

Nurture this.

Water it every day.

Marvel at its wonder and beauty. Amen.