



John 11:1-16  
So That You May Believe: John  
“Plastic Jesus”

Rev. Brian North  
September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2022

This week, we had a repairman come to fix our washing machine. It was leaking water. It also leaked two years ago, and I knew from that experience there was a second one of the part in the machine that was replaced that first time: One for hot water and one for cold water. But I wasn't sure about the part, and I didn't have the courage to check it out myself. So, I called a repairman on Sunday, and he came on Thursday. He took the top panel off of the washer, and then after letting the machine run for a couple minutes, we saw the slow drips. It was the cold-water valve. Next to it, the hot-water valve, was clearly newer. That's what had been replaced before. So now, I had to have the cold-water valve replaced. Since he was there (which cost \$130 just to evaluate the washer), I had him do it. Part and labor cost \$300, (including the \$130). But I was kicking myself for not being more courageous and looking into it before even calling him. Because once I saw him do it, I knew I could have fixed that on my own. And it would have cost me less than \$50, instead of \$300.

But that's not the point I want to make, though I'll connect it in a moment. The main point I want to make is this: **The repairman couldn't come when I wanted him to.** As I mentioned a moment ago: I called this last Sunday, but he couldn't get here 'til Thursday. I had to wait four days for the healing and salvation of my washing machine; during which time I could have done it myself and saved \$250. But now it's done, and I'm \$300 poorer for it, but it makes a good sermon opener for today. So, praise God for that, and I'll submit the bill as a church business expense later this week. (Just kidding!)

But here's how it fits: **We all have needs in our lives that we hope will get taken care of in the timing we'd like.** (And at the cost we'd like.) I wanted my washer fixed on my schedule. Before that it was other stuff – mending a relationship; a car repair, the Mariners to make the play-offs anytime over the last two decades; an adoption not to take 7 years (by the way...the article I wrote for the July Messenger that said maybe this summer we'd be finally completing the adoption became old news almost the day it hit your mailboxes...We're hoping by Christmas now); ...the list goes on. You have

undoubtedly wanted something on your schedule as well: from Physical healing for yourself or a loved one to financial well-being; From a relationship blossoming to landing a new job; and so much more. What about when things don't happen on our schedule? What happens when things don't go the way we hoped or planned?

In today's passage, we see some friends of Jesus' wanting him to do something on their schedule. But Jesus has a different timeline in mind, and for his own reasons. Let's read about that in today's passage, and see what we can learn from it to apply to our own lives. **John 11:1-6**

You know, there are some fallacies about Jesus that float around in people's heads. Probably most all of us have constructed an image of Jesus, and inevitably the image of Jesus that we each have has some variations from the image that the Bible actually paints. Some of the misunderstandings are exclusively in the heads of those people who have heard very little of Jesus from the biographical accounts of his life, while other fallacies exist in the heads of Christians who've read those biographies many times. We've all got misconceptions of Jesus. **One of the misconceptions that many people have about Jesus is that he will do what we want, so as to make our lives easier.**

There's a country song called, *Plastic Jesus* that was written a number of years ago and has been recorded by several different artists over the years. I want to share with you some of the lyrics. By the way, this is the second time in like 6 weeks that I've shared lyrics from a country song, which is probably proof that I need to see a doctor. So, pray for me. Anyway, here you go:

**I don't care if it rains or freezes  
Long as I got my plastic Jesus  
Riding on the dashboard of my car.**

**Through my trials and tribulations  
And my travels through the nations  
With my plastic Jesus I'll go far.**

## **Plastic Jesus plastic Jesus, Riding on the dashboard of my car<sup>1</sup>**

I shared that lyric in my very first sermon when I became pastor of a church in Chehalis some 16 years ago, and a few days later, one of the congregants (who I had literally just met for the first time on that Sunday – his name is Larry) brought me this plastic Jesus. I've kept it ever since, as a reminder of this illustration. **This is one of the most frequent misunderstandings of who Jesus is, and we see it in today's passage: that He's convenient, that he's here to make our lives trouble-free, smooth and easy.** We want him to operate on our schedules and fix things when we want, and how we want them fixed. That's a misconception of Jesus that I often carry around on the dashboard of my life, and maybe you do, too. But we aren't the first ones to go for that fallacy. We see this in the Scripture passage that we read just a moment ago.

**Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus with an expectation that he's going to make the pain of potential loss in their lives go away.** They're coming to Jesus with a prayer request in part for Lazarus's sake, obviously; but also for theirs. They want Lazarus to be healed. And obviously it's serious, because Jesus' response is that “this sickness will not end in death.” Can you imagine going to the doctor with some sinus congestion and having the doctor say, “Don't worry, this sickness won't end with your death.” That probably wouldn't be very comforting, actually, because it wouldn't have crossed your mind as a remote possibility! So, if that's Jesus' response, the sickness certainly had the women very concerned, because you don't give that kind of response if it's not a serious problem. And yet Jesus waits a couple days.

Maybe you've come to Jesus much like Mary and Martha and you expected a certain outcome or a certain response. And maybe what you hoped for isn't what happened. Oftentimes we want Jesus to work in a certain way in our lives, but he doesn't. And: That's what happens to Mary and Martha – they don't get the response they wanted from Jesus, probably leaving them feeling a bit dejected.

**But Jesus has another agenda, because he sees the bigger picture, and he puts them on hold for a bit.** This is the first place in this story where we see Jesus not going according to human plans. The second place we see Jesus doing this comes in the next few verses (**John 11:7-10**). So, he finally does decide to go to Bethany, the town where Lazarus is. It's in Judea. And after he stayed where he was for two more days Jesus tells his disciples that he wants to go back to Judea, where Jerusalem is, and Bethany is just a 40 minute walk or so from Jerusalem. The guys look at him like he's got some kind of death wish.

“What!” the disciples say. “You're crazy! Don't you remember the last time you were there and they tried to stone you?” We saw that just last week, and then he left the area. *Now* Jesus wants to go back, shortly after having left the area, and after waiting a couple of days since he got this news about Lazarus. Once again, we see Jesus operating on his schedule, and according to his playbook, not ours. Let's see where this goes next (**John 11:11-16**).

So, Jesus uses “sleep” as a metaphor for death, telling them that Lazarus has actually now died. He's too late. The request of Mary and Martha has gone unfulfilled. I bet we can all identify with that. Just this last week, with the float plane that crashed just off Whidbey Island, friends and family of those who were on the plane feel kind of like Mary and Martha. One of the guys on that plane, Ross Mickel, whose 8-month pregnant wife was with him, as well as their 22 month old son...Ross graduated from my high school two years behind me. I knew him. He was in my sister's graduating class. She and I also knew him from Sunday school and youth group at church. My parents knew his parents. Now, even back then, we weren't close...I wouldn't say we were friends back then; he was an acquaintance. But what was already a tragic event hit a little closer for me this week, and I shed a few tears. His death, along with the others, is tragic. No one wanted this (in fact, prayed just the opposite probably – for safe travels), much like Mary and Martha with Lazarus. We've all had moments in our lives where we can easily identify with Mary and Martha.

The disciples think going back there seems a little risky, in light of the recent attempt to stone Jesus to death. But Jesus explains in plain language that

Lazarus has died – which, notice that the gospels don't record for us that anyone actually told him this, and judging by the disciples' response, they obviously didn't know. And so, **Jesus is saying metaphorically that he is going to go and wake Lazarus from the dead.** He's going to perform not just a healing on the man, but a complete and total resurrection, and – as he says – it's for the benefit of the disciples so they “would believe.”

But apparently, Thomas doesn't really understand Jesus even speaking in plain language, and so he goes completely “Peter.” Know what I mean? He decides that Peter shouldn't be the only one of the twelve who gets to put his foot in his mouth, and he comes up with this unbelievable statement: “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” Great. He's saying, “Let's just all go and get ourselves dead and see if Jesus will wake us too.” Though I'm not sure that Thomas really even understood what he was saying, let alone what Jesus was saying. He seems to be relating to Lazarus. Or maybe he thinks Jesus is going to be stoned by his detractors, and Thomas is saying this as a sign of solidarity with Jesus: If Jesus is getting killed going back there, then let's go with him and die with him. Maybe that's what he means...but it's a little unclear.

Now, the events continue, and I know some of us are familiar with where this goes, but maybe some of us aren't...and right now all we have from the text (and all the disciples would know in the moment) is Jesus' promise that God the Father and Jesus the Son will be glorified through this. But we don't know how that's going to play out. The good news is that we'll keep going in this next Sunday, and finish it out the Sunday after that. It's like a mini-3 Sunday sermon series within the larger scope of this series in the Gospel of John.

And so: **Without spoiling how things turn out, we can still learn from Jesus' words when he says, this is “for God's glory and to glorify the Son.”** You see, Jesus never leaves or forsakes us. Scripture tells us that clearly, from cover to cover – from Adam and Even in the garden and God comes to them just after they've disobeyed him and eaten the forbidden fruit, to the eternal presence we're invited into that we see at the end of the Bible in Revelation. God is there with us, he both comes to us and he invites us into

his presence. We're never far from him. But it's not about us. It's not about you. It's not about me. **Ultimately, all of life, all of creation, all of our faith, all of what God does...it's all for his glory as the creator, sustainer, and redeemer of all creation for all time, through Jesus Christ his son.**

And so, even in the face of disappointments in life...even when we wonder where Jesus is, and why his timing is different than ours...even those things are for God's glory, and Jesus' glory, as Jesus says here. Even the challenges. Even the grief. Even the hard times. Even the things that bring us to our knees in tears. Even the slumps. Ultimately, it's all for him. Jesus himself lived this out on the cross. That is the tragedy of tragedies – that a sinless man would die for sinners. But ultimately, through the resurrection, it was for God's glory. Somehow, some way, God is seeking to bring about glory through even the difficulties and tragedies of life. This is the hope that Jesus gives us. If all we really are concerned about is ourselves, then it's hard to see past or through the difficulties of life. But when our lives are about bringing God glory...when He matters more that we do...when our lives are centered on Him and we live for him...then God can work through us to bring him glory.

So, here's what I want to leave you with: **This week, let's look for the opportunities God gives us to bring him glory – even in the midst of challenges and difficulties – from broken washing machines to broken relationships to broken lives.** (And don't forget to bring him glory in the midst of successes, too! We often take credit for those, but blame God when things are tough, right?) Because Jesus is not a plastic Jesus, available for us to manipulate however we want. Instead, God is with us and he's moving in his time, according to his plan, to bring him glory through us in all seasons of life. Let's pray...Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=3557>