

Text: 1 Kings 19:19-21. 3rd Sunday in Epiphany. **January 25, 2015**

Christ is our leader – follow Him! Amen.

When I was growing up in the 1990s, there was this popular computer game – and it was called... *The Oregon Trail*. *The Oregon Trail* was like the *Minecraft* of twenty years ago. And for those of us kids who maybe didn't get out much... *The Oregon Trail* was the EPITOME of ADVENTURE!!! Not only could you click the mouse to shoot buffalo & grizzly bears, but you had the responsibility of planning and managing the entire trip! The year is 1848. As *wagon train leader*, YOU call all the shots – What's your occupation? Who's going with you? How will you spend your 400 dollars? How many yoke of oxen? How many pounds of food? Do you bother with extra parts for your wagon? *Choose wisely*. How much storage space will you have? *Not much*. Obviously, the answers to those questions were all the more important for the original pioneers who actually went for it. The journey from Independence, Missouri to the beautiful Willamette Valley out west was a one-time, don't-look-back, life-changing migration. And it wasn't all fun and games. You couldn't just stop halfway/turn around because little Henry has the measles. The heat, the cold, the dust, the snow. The Oregon Adventure was not for the faint of heart. Yet would YOU have what it takes? When you're in the middle of the Rocky Mountains, will you have the right stuff inside your covered wagon? And will you have ENOUGH???

Adventure waits for nobody! Ya gotta go! **The time is now!** The wagon is departing ASAP!

Well... here we are in God's house today → Our Lord Jesus is not so much our wagon train leader, marking off a checklist of supplies, making trades when necessary. No, but he is our unquestioned leader – better yet, Jesus is our SAVIOR, and his instructions are the same for YOU & ME as they were for a farmer named Elisha, or for his original twelve fishermen disciples. It shouldn't be a surprise; Jesus consistently encourages us: *"The time is now! The kingdom of God is near!"* It's exciting! It seems like a grand idea! But then Jesus drops a bit of a bombshell. Jesus doesn't say, *"Alright, gather up your stuff. Make sure to fill up that wagon... and just let me know when you wanna leave."*

There's no wagon. No *nothing*. Just Jesus, who says: *"Drop everything... and follow me."*

It's as if Jesus is saying, "I'm in charge of this journey." And he is. There is no time to fill even your wallet with plastic or your mouth with food. Just, **"Come, follow me."**

Friends, Jesus speaks to EACH of us through his Word. His *call* comes to EVERY one of us, from little boy Samuel to middle-aged Elisha. Whether you are a bible scholar or a later-in-life Christian. Whether you are on "cloud nine" today or if you'd rather no one say words to you... it doesn't matter. When Jesus says, **"Come, follow me!"**... he's talking to YOU. He's talking to ME. And perhaps strangest of all: **"I will make you fishers of people."** The command of Christ to "follow me" is not an option... like whether or not to ford the river. Whether or not to migrate west. His command comes to ALL people.

Yeah... you don't have to be a pastor! I think this is pretty neat: it doesn't matter what your job is, where you rank within your profession, not even the amount of money to your name. You can teach little kids all day long and still **follow Jesus**. You can clean hotel rooms on the weekends and still **follow Jesus**. You can stand stationary in an assembly line day after day... and can still *marvelously follow Jesus*. You can certainly work at *Epic*; you can commute to Chicago. You can be looking for a *new job*... and yet you, Christian, are seeking to live a life that goes beyond vocation. It means: you **follow Jesus**.

Take, for example, two gentlemen. Spotlight's on *Elijah* and *Elisha*.

First Elijah. Easy for this guy, right? He's God's prophet – the LORD speaks *directly to him!* When the false prophets of Baal threatened Elijah's job *and his life*, the LORD confused them and he even rained fire down on Mount Carmel. *Too bad – Elijah forgot about all that*. He didn't trust the LORD of heaven and earth, but wandered off to some cave, where he pouted and moped and wished to die. To this behavior, God responded with more fire – also a tornado and an earthquake. But the LORD was not IN any of those. But then the LORD came to his prophet with a *still, small voice* – not by force, but by a gentle whisper that woke Elijah right up. And the LORD told him, *"Elijah, listen to my WORD. Go. I want you to get up, and go. First item: go and find Elisha, son of Shaphat."* Wow. From a high, to a low, to *"just go."* *Elijah* was a stressed-out, aging prophet of God, who showed classic signs of stubbornness. Yet God still gave him words to say – in fact, words of Jesus. *"Come, follow me."* And suddenly Elijah found himself walking across a large patch of farmland.

Which brings us to Elisha. If you like taking away ONE, maybe TWO things from a sermon, maybe here's one. Look at Elisha's remarkable response. It says: **"Elisha... left his oxen and RAN after Elijah."** Can you picture young farmer Elisha out in his field – not a care in the world! Maybe he's whistling through a blade of grass. He's just *living life*. He has no idea that the most famous prophet in all of Israel will soon stop by. And it seems, Elisha's parents' farm may have been the biggest, most successful one around. Not every farmer has 24 strong oxen at his disposal! Realize for a moment just *how much* Elisha had to give up. A LOT. And as much as the prophet's visit was unannounced and out of the blue, young Elisha knew full well what it all meant. This was not

just some take-it-or-leave-it summer internship. This wasn't your typical tweak of the schedule/just a few additional office hours. This was a wholesale, landscape-altering career change.

Quick, Elisha! DECIDE! Change your life!

And so he did. In a matter of minutes, Elisha is butchering up his oxen and burning every last part of the farming implement. Elisha, you're giving up SO MUCH! It seems almost rash. But he doesn't hesitate. Elisha divvies up the meat among his dear family, and that's it – he's gone!

Elisha gives US an awesome example! Sure, be polite toward your parents; be kind enough to kiss them goodbye. But more importantly, THIS: **drop everything & follow Him!** Everything means everything! Leave your cows. Leave your car. You don't need it! When God comes calling, he's not looking for what you have. *He's looking for YOU!* Elisha demonstrates a priceless truth for every believer: you don't need a home or security or money to follow Jesus. You need a beating heart, a soul, and a mind. All these God gave to you, so drop everything else and give these back to Him who made you. **HEART. SOUL. MIND.**

That's a lot. That's a lot to ask, Lord.

But can you imagine... if Elisha had sized up Elijah and said to him: *"You know, I respect you. You're a great prophet and all... but see those oxen over there??? There's a lot of potential in those trusty cattle. So, thanks but no thanks."* Or can you imagine... if Simon and Andrew had told Jesus: *"Rabbi, we've made up our mind. Yeah, fishing for men sounds neat – it really does! But... we're going to keep fishing for fish. OK?"* No one really says that... but don't we act like it? You and I tend to take Jesus figuratively sometimes when we really shouldn't. Jesus says what he means and means what he says.

- 1) Jesus may say, *"Drop everything – follow me."* Yet we fill up our houses and adorn our personal spaces with all sorts of purchases, gadgets, souvenirs, mementos. Fun memories but things that often distract from the ultimate purposes of a new life in Christ.
- 2) Jesus may say, *"I have loved you so much and given you all that you see, so test me in this: give back to God what I've already given you."* Yet on the yearly budget chart *"for the gospel of Jesus"* somehow receives a small space toward the bottom.

You and I are really ill-prepared to drop everything and follow Jesus. Maybe it was even a New Year's resolution: *"I want to do more for Jesus."* 25 days in, our tone has already changed: *"Be patient with me, God. I'll get the hang of it... Ugh, how can I make it up to you, Lord?"*

Well, you & I **can't**. We can't do it. Resolutions are crumbling. Every human formula falls apart.

But... I will confidently share with you... it's never too late to start using God's nifty solution. You don't need to wait until next January. As you trudge along life's trail, maybe this simple equation can help you:

Jesus + NOTHING = EVERYTHING!

You can fill in the blanks in your worship folders. **Jesus + NOTHING = EVERYTHING!** Did you know? It's just another way of saying and a proper way of understanding Christ's command: **"Come, follow me!"** And do you know what it means? It means freedom. When Jesus calls you and me to **"repent and believe the good news!"** it's not a matter of coercion or force. It is not a spirit of fear that makes disciples follow Jesus, that makes Elisha run after Elijah, that causes Christians to follow Christ. It is a spirit of **JOY** and of **FREEDOM**. It's just as good as our J.O.Y. acronym. Jesus, others, yourself – and in that order. In the same way, we understand this:

Jesus + NOTHING = EVERYTHING!

Elisha asked Elijah: "Can I say bye to my mom & dad?" And Elijah said: *"(Of course!) What have I done to you?"* Elisha could go in peace.

Isn't that like when God says to us: **"What have I done to YOU?"**

When the time comes to follow Jesus – like right NOW – don't look inside yourself. Instead, see & remember and re-remember what the LORD has done for you! First of all, the LORD has called you away from evil. He's called you out of all the bad things in this vale of tears. He has snatched you **from death and Satan himself**. For, even when we were DEAD IN OUR SIN, God made us ALIVE IN CHRIST. By the light of his Son, our heavenly Father has called us out of darkness. On the one hand, it's amazing that God should **remove our sins from us** – as far as the east is from the west, right? And he rescues us even despite our sinful grumbling and complaining, even when we half-heartedly commit to a life of following Jesus. God has done amazing things for sinners like us, we who are often *surprised* at how hard this trail of life can be.

What else has God done for you? On the other hand, not only has he rescued us from death... he has also called us **TO righteousness**. It's like he graciously steers our wagon off the *wrong trail* and onto the path of salvation. And in view of Jesus' ultimate *sacrifice*, God enables his children to use His wisdom found in His Word to make our own sacrifices of thanks. He gives us the abilities and literally *calls* us to navigate and weather the obstacles that crop up along the trail. In view of what God has already done for you, drop everything that hinders and rely solely on the wagon train leader. Better yet, lean entirely on your Savior, who went the journey alone, and died for you, that someday you will enter the promised land of heaven!

You know, Elijah had his prophet's cloak, and in a symbolic transfer of office, he draped his cloak over Elisha. That's not just a coincidence native to culture or career... but a beautiful picture of what God does for us. He takes his righteousness and drapes it over you and me like a beautiful shield of grace. He gives his cloak of righteousness to you as a gift that no one really saw coming.

How do you think those Oregon Trailblazers felt when they saw the Pacific Ocean for the first time? Six months earlier did they ever think they would be uprooted and guided along a wagon trail, over hills, across plains – basically everywhere?

Our God does us one better. He has promised to guide us by the hand even as we are safely in His hands.

He called us out of darkness, into his wonderful light.

He calls us out of sometimes good opportunities, only to give us an eternally better one.

We know our ultimate purpose is found in Christ – the time is now to follow Jesus. No worry, angst, or fear. With a sense of joy and freedom, we can head down the trail to heaven, nothing in our hands, everything in the hands of Him who lived, who died, who rose again. Dear Christian, follow Jesus, who knows the trials of your trail, who illumines your path with the light of his Word – Amen.