

## **Introduction:**

I have a friend. We'll call her Ruby. She lives in the United States. We met about 10 years ago in China and became good friends. Ruby is not a Christian. We had some opportunities to talk about it in China. During the time when we moved back and were both living in North America, Ruby entered into a committed polyamorous relationship with 2 other people. The three of them consider themselves married and have some children. I had expressed some concerns with the situation, but still wanted Ruby to know I cared a lot about her.

I was able to visit with her and another friend about 2 years ago. It was a really nice reunion. We had some good times reliving some of our memories and giggling together. We had the opportunity to spend some time alone when I visited, and I asked if I could share the gospel and talk about Christianity. She shared a bit how she grew up and she is open to the spiritual realm and had questions. I shared with her what Jesus did on the cross and what that means for us. Ruby had a question at the end of our discussion. She said something like this, "What I have in my triad relationship is so beautiful. We love it and it brings so much joy. If I become a Christian, I know we can't live like that."

Congregation, how would you respond to Ruby?

I replay that part of the conversation in my mind a lot. I replay how I responded. I think what I said was ok, but after reflecting on it I think I would have said something else. Because what I wish I had said is largely shaped by our text. Let's dive into it.

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We have Elijah and Elisha. Elisha had been Elijah's apprentice for about 18 years. 18 years! We can imagine they had become very good friends and were pretty tight. Elijah led a very eventful life, and we can imagine that Elisha was privy to all of that. Can you imagine Elijah and Elisha sitting down with some water and reliving their memories and giggling? "Remember that time when God sent ravens to feed me by the brook? That was so rad!" "Not as rad as Mount Carmel. Nothing can top that. Prophet highlight right there!" Those two had been through a lot together. And it was about to come to end.

It was time for Elijah's to pass the torch of his ministry to his successor. In the first 6 verses of our text, we can see a scene where we see one final test for Elisha. Will he count the cost of what it means to follow in Elijah's footsteps? Will he persist as a prophet of Yahweh? Will he persevere through all that is ahead?

It's a scene where Elijah is giving Elisha many opportunities to stay. And each time Elisha says, "No way. I am going. I am in this."

Their first stop is Bethel. I wonder when they get there what went through Elisha's mind. Maybe he was remembering history. Bethel was where Jacob had his dream of the stairway to heaven. He renamed that place Bethel, meaning "house of God." He meant for it to be site to worship God. It remained a main worship centre in Israel for a while.

But that changed when Israel split into the two kingdoms with Rehoboam ruling Judah and Jeroboam ruling the northern kingdom. Jerusalem of course was in Judah where people would go to the temple to worship, so Jeroboam set up a temple in Bethel – a golden calf, a few non-Levitical priests, and a feast. With the goal of none of his people having to go to Jerusalem. So, since then, Bethel has had deeply rooted idolatry. The golden calf shrine was a huge pull, and the town was a big centre of pagan worship.

Elisha's got to be thinking. Oh my. It's my job to go in there and tell all those people that they are worshipping a false god and everything they have staked their life into is a lie.

Elijah tries to shake Elisha again. "Elisha. Please stay here. The Lord has sent me to Jericho." Elisha responds, "Nope. I am with you. I am in this. As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you."

They go to Jericho. What's Elisha thinking now. Hey kids of Trinity church. Do you remember what happened at Jericho? (all the walls came down). Yea. I'm sure Elisha is thinking about that and that Jericho was cursed. After all the walls fell down, Joshua cursed it. Jericho, like, Bethel, was another big center of pagan worship and where idolatry is rampant. Another big job.

Elijah gives Elisha a chance to back out. "Stay here; the Lord has sent me to the Jordan." Elisha will not have it. He sees Jericho and knows what he is up against and he is still willing to follow Elijah. He responds to Elijah, "I will not leave you." They keep walking. They stopped at the Jordan. 50 men from the company of prophets went and stood at a distance. Elijah takes his cloak, rolls it up, and somehow strikes the water with it. The water parts in the middle and they cross over on dry ground.

Elisha persists. He's all in. He just walked past two towns to remind him how big his job is and what is ahead of him. I'm sure him and Elijah had good times, but they also had really hard times. Elisha was reminded it all. Reminded that being a prophet is hard. It will cost him his safety. People don't like prophets and try to kill them. It will cost him a social life. Prophets are lonely.

Elisha is not choosing a convenient career; he is choosing a hard life. Elijah gives him every excuse to go, but Elisha persists. He is determined to follow him no matter what. He shows him with his actions that he knows it takes work and he is willing to pay that price. Before he officially takes over for Elijah, he counts the cost first. He is not under an illusion that following God is easy. He knows it will cost him.

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Congregation, we also should not be under any illusions either. What is following Jesus costing you? Right now. What does it cost you? I imagine the first two things we think of when we hear that is our money and our time. Maybe you think of a monetary figure. Following Jesus costs me X amount of dollars per month. It costs us. We could be using that money to take an extra trip, more clothes, pay off the mortgage faster, but we instead we give it the church and to our organizations that are part of the same mission we are. We will have an offering later where we get the opportunity to give to Trinity Ministries and to Mosaic Centre. There is a literal financial cost to all of us to follow Jesus.

Maybe you think of the time you spend each month volunteering for the church or another organization. It costs us to volunteer. We could be watching Netflix or taking a day off, but we use some of that time to serve because we are servants.

And of course, worshiping God corporately costs us our Sunday mornings as well as setting time aside for spiritual disciplines. When we think of what it costs us to follow Jesus, I imagine the first 2 things we think of is time and money and that is real and I want to affirm those things. It should cost us our time and our money.

If you have ever met, read or heard about Christians in other parts of the world, if they were asked that question, “what is following Jesus costing you?” other things would come to mind. For Christians in other parts of the world, following Jesus could cost them their freedom. It means prison. For others it could mean social shunning or giving up relationships. For others it could be torture or labor camps. And of course, we know that following Jesus can cost some of our family members their very life.

Because we do not often see this or hear about this in our North American culture, it is often not real to us. It’s good for us to be reminded what our brothers and sisters are paying to following Jesus around the world. Here is a story about a woman named Alicia.

Alicia grew up in the mountains in the Himalayas. Her grandfather was a devil talker. When she was born he proudly stated that it was her destiny to worship the devil and instructed her parents to bring him offerings every day. It was terrifying for her at 3 and 4 years old to bring an offering by herself to a small room outside in the dark to the devil. One day a blind man came with a guide through the village and came into their home and told them about Jesus.

Alicia says, “He told my dad that Jesus has authority over the devil and sin. He told my dad that Jesus is the one true God, who came to conquer the devil, sin, and death so that we can be forgiven of our sin and restored to a right relationship with the one true God.” It was the first time they had heard about Jesus. Her parents believed and taught her. Everything changed. They had a bible and began to read and learn. It wasn’t long because they were shunned by their village. No one would talk to them.

Then when Alicia was 12 her parents left to get supplies. They didn't return. The villagers told her and her brother that they died in a rock landslide. But that's not actually what happened. The villagers got together and threw rocks at them until they were dead. Then they pushed them down the mountain. She was orphaned and went to a new town where she lived and went to school and found a church. She had a lot of conversations and thought really hard about what it would mean to her to follow Jesus. She had to ask herself, "Can I persist? Can I pay this price? She had the opportunity to say no. She could have stayed behind. She saw clearly what she was up against. The opposition to the gospel. After fully counting the cost, she was baptized and publicly believes in Jesus. She is all in. She is a teacher now and works in the mountains where her parents were martyred.

Seems like a story from a movie, but it's not. It's real. And I tell the story to remind us that following Jesus isn't convenient. It's not safe and fun for the whole family. It's not a fairy tale. It does give us a happy ending in the long run, but a hard suffering life in the short run.

Following Jesus costs us. Like Elisha, we have pauses in our life. Stops that we make where we can clearly see what we have to go up against. So, we should ask ourselves in those moments. Can we persist? Are we willing to be hated? Are we willing to be misunderstood? Are we willing to be lonely? Are we willing to be counter cultural? Are we willing to love the people that Jesus loves – like the poor and socially marginalized and go after the lost sheep? Are we willing to lose our jobs? Are we willing to give up everything to follow Jesus?

I wish I had the awareness to realize that that is what Ruby was doing. She was counting the cost. She was thinking out loud. She heard the gospel. She had questions about her relationship. And she was essentially asking me and asking herself in this place, “Would I have to give up my relationships? Am I willing to?” She was doing something very wise.

When I replay the conversation that I had with Ruby in my head, a thought that entered into my brain right after she said that. Do you know what I thought? I thought something like, “Hmm. Yea. Ruby is so happy. Following Jesus would ruin that. Maybe it’s better she didn’t.”

Do you ever have those moments, congregation where you just pause on your journey, take a look at the opposition to the gospel and wonder if it’s easier to stay behind. Are we giving up our time, money, reputation, and life and just “poof” goes meaninglessly unnoticed into space?

In other words, do you ever wonder... is it worth it? Is it worth it? Because that’s key, isn’t it? I mean, what is this all for?

I want to remind us all this morning, congregation. That following Jesus is worth it. That it is not all for nothing. It’s for everything.

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That’s what Elisha would have thought on his walk. He knew what he was getting himself into. He not only knew the cost. He knew the reward. And what we really see here is that he knew he wasn’t doing this on his own strength.

Elijah asks Elisha, “What can I do for you before I am taken from you?” Elisha says, “Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit.” Elisha is referring to the inheritance of firstborns. The firstborn son always got a double portion. Elisha wants to continue Elijah’s work as though he was his firstborn. Elisha doesn’t say, “a million shekels” or “a nice easy life” or “an extra pair of sandals.” What does he ask? He asks for help. He doesn’t just ask for a little bit of help or some help. He asks to inherit all of Elijah’s prophetic power. He knows it’s a big job following in Elijah’s footsteps and speaking for God.

“You have asked a difficult thing,” Elijah said, “yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise, it will not.”

They were just walking and talking when suddenly, a chariot of fire and horses of fire came and came in between both of them and separated them. And Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha sees this and calls him “father” twice. Elisha receives the help he requested.

He is very sad. He lost his bestie. His mentor. Tears his garment in mourning. He has a huge job. He knew the cost and he knows the reward. He picks up Elijah’s cloak. Strikes the water with it. Same thing happens for him as it did for Elijah – the river divides to the right and to the left and he can cross over.

Can you imagine what Elisha is thinking as he walks through the parted river. He’s walking. Maybe he stops and he looks to each side and just sees a vertical wall of water. Maybe he reaches his hand out to touch. How high is it? What do you think Elisha is thinking in this moment?

Do you think he regrets following in Elijah's footsteps? Do you think he regrets dedicating his life to serve the Lord? Of course not. He's in the middle of a rushing river that the Lord God Almighty is holding up for him. My guess is as he was walking through, he was spiritually exhilarated and thought, "This is worth it. God – you are worth it." And again thought, "I am in this."

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That's what I wished I had said to Ruby. But as I said earlier, I wish I had the insight to know that Ruby was counting the cost. And I wish I responded by saying that Jesus is worth it.

I wish I had said something like, "Ruby. I hear you. Following Jesus is not convenient. It's hard. I'm glad that you are pausing and thinking about it before going in. There is a cost to following Jesus. It costs us. It costs us money, time, relationships, reputation, social standings....Ruby, it costs us our lives to follow Jesus. I don't know what that would look like for you. And I want you to know. That it is worth it. Jesus is valuable enough. And when/if that time comes, the Holy Spirit will give you the help you need – including changing your heart and will and inclining them toward him. We do not do this with our own strength."

I'd say something like that. And I say the same to us this morning:

Trinity, following Jesus is not convenient. There is a cost. I don't know what that looks like for you, but I do know it is worth it. As we pause together and look at all the opposition, let us also not forget the reward.

Hebrews 12 says, "Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith."

For we are following a Messiah who didn't skip the cost but counted it. He knew the price he had to pay. Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River as the start to his ministry and when he crossed it, he knew he had a tough job to do. He had the double portion of prophetic power for Jesus Christ is the actual begotten firstborn son of God. Jesus didn't escape death like Elijah, but he went through it to pay the ransom for our sins.

Jesus saw more than the cost. When he was on the cross he wasn't just thinking about the pain, but he was thinking of the reward. Hebrews 12 says, "For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning it's shame."

We are reminded that it is not by our strength we do this, but we have the Holy Spirit working in us, reminding us that this is not all for nothing.

Because first and foremost, God does not call us to a short inconvenient life. First, he calls us to an eternal perfectly blissful life. He promises us that our life would be hard, but that we would be repaid for all our losses. Waiting for us is an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. The actual cost calculated is more than worth it. In addition, for this life he promises that he will help us to endure any and all hardships. He sent us his Spirit so we would know the presence of Jesus throughout our lives.

And that is key.

Congregation, I know we all have moments where we stop and pause and wonder if it's worth it. Like Elisha, we sometimes pause and see the opposition that is set before us. We think, oh boy. This is my life. And we think that maybe it is just easier to stay behind.

My guess is we also have moments similar to when Elisha walked through the river. Moments and memories where the presence of Jesus is so strong and real. And in those moments, we know our identity is secure; we have a relationship that can never be broken, and we feel the unconditional love wash over us.

Those are the moments. When we remember and know the presence of Jesus. When our eyes are on fixed on him and we think, “this. This is worth it. Jesus, you are worth it.”

So, whenever we think it would be easier to stay, we will boldly tell our Lord Jesus, “no way. I will not leave you. I am in this. As surely as you live, which is forever, – I am with you. I am with you forever.”

Amen.