

Crossing Over
[2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14](#)
[Galatians 5:22-23a, 25](#)

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Paul writes to the people of Galatia, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit" (v. 25). The Spirit is what guides us forward. I found another translation I especially like for this verse: "If we are living in the Spirit, let us also keep step with the Spirit" (William Barclay, *The Letters to Galatians and Ephesians*, 49). Keeping in step with the Spirit is what our amazing piano player, Michelle, does so well.

Today is a day of transitions. This is a season of transitions for all of us. School is over; for some, summer school has already started. There have been promotion and graduation exercises, final dance recitals, band concerts, weddings, new births, and baptisms. College students are coming home, only to depart again for summer internships and jobs. This past week at our California Nevada Annual Conference, we learned more than 60 pastors are leaving their congregations this week. For-sale signs are up in the front lawns of houses, and I keep hearing about young people and young families not being able to find a place to rent for under \$2000 a month. I know of people here at our church looking for jobs, and I know of folks retiring. Everyone is in flux, crossing over from one time of life to another.

The Jordan River is the setting for several biblical crossings.

Jacob crossed the Jordan to go back to his mother's people (Genesis 32:11). From the Jordan, he went on to the Jabbok River to meet up with his brother Esau, and on his way he wrestled with God in the night and then found reconciliation. The Jordan crossing was for him a homecoming.

Joshua crossed over the Jordan with the ark of the covenant. The flowing waters stood still, and the nation of Israel crossed on dry soil to Jericho and into the Promised Land (Joshua 3:1-17). That Jordan crossing was again a homecoming.

In our story today from the book of 2 Kings, the Prophet Elijah knows he must leave his servant, Elisha, to be his successor. But Elijah is reluctant to leave, and Elisha is reluctant to have him leave. That is the way it often is with parting. It's hard to say good-bye.

Elijah tells his servant Elisha to wait behind, but Elisha won't have that. He insists he will not leave Elijah, his mentor. So they go on to Bethel together. Then Elijah again tells Elisha to stay back, but Elisha will not leave his mentor. 50 men join them, and they walk up to the Jordan River. (Now where I knelt down at the bank of the Jordan River, when I was there in 2013, it was just a bend in the river, and the water was shallow, and you could throw a stone across to the other side. But here where Elijah and Elisha were standing, not far from the Dead Sea, the river was deep and wide. Too deep and too wide to ford on foot.) So Elijah took his mantle—a cloak—and rolled it up and struck the water with it. And the

water parted, and the two men crossed over on dry land. Elijah knew this wasn't easy for Elisha, so he asked him what he could do for him to ease this transition. Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." Elijah said the only way that would happen would be if Elisha watched very closely, which he did. They walked along some more, Elisha watching every minute, and then a chariot of fire separated the two of them. Elijah ascended in a whirlwind, and Elisha looked up at him and shouted, "Father, father!" They had become like father and son. Elijah was gone, but Elisha had a double share of his spirit.

When someone we love leaves, something of the person remains—a double share of spirit. And what a blessing that is.

The parting happened at a river crossing. Like Moses who parted the Red Sea and passed on the mantle to Joshua, Elijah parted the Jordan and passed on the mantle to Elisha.

The work isn't done, the work of justice and liberation and compassion, and God gives us a double portion of spirit, so that we can make it over the transition and keep going in step.

Sometimes that gift of the spirit comes at a river crossing. When I was in college at American University in Washington, D.C. I lived in an apartment in Virginia near Key Bridge on the Potomac River. A couple bridges to the south was the 14th Street Bridge. I could just imagine the story when I heard it reported on the news some years later. Roger Rosenblatt told this story beautifully in an essay published in *Time Magazine* in 1982, "The Man in the Water" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dz9JKtvC_wE).

Air Florida flight 90 had just taken off from what was then called Washington National Airport (now Reagan National Airport). Seconds after take-off, the airplane failed to rise up, and struck the 14th Street Bridge that crosses over the Potomac River. The plane hit the guardrail and 6 occupied cars and a truck that were crossing on the bridge. The damaged plane with 74 passengers and 5 crew plunged into the river through the January ice. Traffic jammed, and emergency vehicles descended on the riverbank. The first responders spotted a few of the passengers clinging to the wrecked fuselage nearly submerged in the water. Lenny Sputnik, a 28-year-old U.S. Budget Office employee was watching by the side of the river. When he spotted a woman from the plane in the water going under, he jumped into the river, swam to the woman and pulled her to safety. Later he said simply, "Somebody had to go into the water." A park police helicopter team arrived. Donald Usher and Eugene Windsor were the 2 men in the helicopter. They flew to rescue the stranded passengers and risked their lives as they dipped the skids of their helicopter into the water to pick up survivors one at a time. But another man who went down in history that day couldn't tell the story. He was known simply as "the man in the water." He had been on the crashed plane, and each time when the helicopter came down to the water to get another survivor and lowered a lifeline into the icy river, this man passed the ring off to another person. He passed the line off 5 times, and those 5 passengers were pulled to safety. Then the man went under the water. The helicopter came back for him, but he was gone. There are lots of stories of airline crashes, but this one was different.

"The man in the water" put the lives of 5 strangers ahead of his own. At some point, he must have known he would not live if he continued to pass the rope off to still another passenger. He would have known he was freezing and could not survive. Yet he stuck to his decision to give the lifeline away, to another, and to another. And in the process, he gave a lifeline to everyone who observed the rescue effort that day, and to everyone who ever reads or hears this story.

The lifeline was a double share of spirit. One for the people he saved and one for us, observing. Because his spirit of compassion and selflessness lives on when we tell this story about 46-year-old Arland Dean Williams, Jr., "the man in the water."

It was a remarkable crossing—tragic for the families of all the passengers and crew who died, but the part we remember is the double share of spirit from "the man in the water."

The double share of spirit that Elijah left for Elisha was God's way of passing the mantle. At Annual Conference, we watched the retirees walk across the stage, and then they passed the mantle to the new ordinands. Those leaving the active ministry make way for the new ministers who are to be ordained. Senior clergy mentor the new ones, and then they pass on the mantle of responsibility and authority. We leave something behind when we move through a new transition. We leave a part of ourselves, a blessing for those who follow.

Michelle leaves the fruit of her spirit, which she has in her because it is her response to God's love. Paul describes the fruit of the spirit as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." These make up a double share of spirit, one that Michelle takes with her for the next chapter of her story, as she crosses over into Oregon for her homecoming, and one that she leaves with us, the second share.

Our task is to live in that Spirit and keep in step.