

Our Citizenship is in Heaven

Ephesians 2:14-22; Philippians 3:20; James 4:7

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

April 27, 2025/First Sunday of Easter

I'd like to begin by once again expressing my deep gratitude to you as a church for the gift of a second sabbatical.

I use the word “gift” very intentionally. I know that many people do not get such an opportunity to take some time away, to reflect, to recharge, to pray, to rest, to walk (for a long time!).

This sabbatical is coming at a very timely moment. It feels like a year full of milestones. 2025 will be the year that I turn 50, Lord willing, and that Naomi and I celebrate our thirtieth wedding anniversary. This feels like a good time to take stock and to open myself up to what God might have to say about the next leg of the journey.

So, thank you. Very much.

Ok, on to the more important business of the day. My words this morning will be brief. I want to talk about baptism and citizenship and resisting the devil.

Baptism is obviously the theme of the day, and we're excited about this. What is baptism?

The act of baptism symbolizes a few different important things.

Incorporation into the body of Christ.

Cleansing from sin.

Unity. Everyone goes through the same gate, regardless of who they are.

New Life—dying and rising with Christ.

Today I want to say that baptism is also a declaration of citizenship.

Paul talks about this in our two of the three texts we heard this morning.

Ephesians 2:17-19:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.”

Philippians 3:20: “But our citizenship is in heaven.”

What does it mean to say that our citizenship is “in heaven?” Does it mean that we should always be thinking about heaven, as if the only point of our earthly lives is to get from here to there?

This is how people sometimes think of it, but I don’t think this is the point.

In his book *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, N.T Wright argues that in reminding the church in Philippi that their “citizenship is in heaven,” Paul is drawing a parallel with the nature of citizenship in the Roman empire.

According to Wright, citizenship in Rome did not mean that Rome was the place you *really* belonged; rather, it had to do with what you sought to make a reality where you *already were*:

The point about citizenship is a point about **status and allegiance**, not about place of residence... Those who were granted Roman citizenship in non-colonial cities... would certainly not interpret that as a standing invitation to retire to Rome in due course. **The logic of colonies and citizenship works the other way round... [The Roman citizen’s] task was to live in the colony by the rules of the mother city, not to yearn to go home again.**

This has a rather obvious application to how Christians are to view their “citizenship in heaven.”

Just as a Roman citizen in Philippi would be expected to spread the influence of Rome—its customs, language, currency, religion, etc. where they were, so the citizen of heaven ought not to pine away for their heavenly “home,” but seek to bring the “culture of heaven” to their *present* home.

This is what it means to say that “our citizenship is in heaven.”

So, Zachary, in a few moments we are going to have a citizenship ceremony. That’s not the only thing we’re doing, but it’s an important part.

You are going to be declaring whose kingdom you ultimately belong to.

And for those of us who have been baptized, I hope this will also be a good reminder of what we promised once upon a time, too!

We are citizens of the kingdom of God. We represent the culture of Christ and his kingdom in a foreign land. This is our primary allegiance.

This is an important word in the context of what we are celebrating today. We rejoice that Zachary is taking this step and we seek as a community to be a place where the culture of Christ is strengthened and nurtured and emboldened.

It is also, I think, an important word in light of what some of us will be doing tomorrow.

Tomorrow is election day (if you hadn’t heard). Our nation will be deciding who will govern us over the next years. This election is taking place in what feels like a uniquely divisive and polarized cultural moment.

(I say this a lot, I know. You won’t have to hear it for a few months!)

I have precisely nothing to say when it comes to *who* you might vote for tomorrow (if you haven’t already voted).

I do have something to say when it comes to your citizenship. Can I encourage us all to remember where our primary allegiance lies?

It is not to a liberal or progressive political vision for the nation of Canada.

It is not to a conservative or traditional political vision for the nation of Canada.

This is really important. So many people pin their hope and dreams, their fears and anxieties, their very *identities* on who happens to be in political power.

If our preferred choice wins, we are exultant! All shall be well! We feel gloriously vindicated.

If our preferred party does not win, we are devastated and angry. The world is ending. We feel righteously outraged.

Can I encourage us to opt out of this game entirely? Jesus will not be limited to the smaller, political narratives to which we so easily give outsized attention.

We are citizens of heaven. Our primary allegiance and identity are tied not to whoever holds power in Ottawa, but in the One who gave up power on a Roman cross two thousand years ago.

We are of a different kingdom and culture. We must never forget this. Our baptisms remind us of this.

I want to end with the verse from James. This one likely seemed a bit of an odd fit to you. Why talk about “resisting the devil?”

I included this verse because it comes out of a conversation Zachary and I had around the baptism questions that I will be asking him in a few moments.

There are various formulations of baptismal questions, and in one of the older ones we looked at, the first question was this:

“Do you renounce the devil and all his works.”

I’m not sure how much time you spend “renouncing” the devil. My guess is not much.

The phrase calls to mind the story of Martin Luther during his time of exile at a castle in Wartburg, Germany when he was translating the New Testament into German.

Luther had always had a vivid sense of being attacked by the devil and other evil spirits and he tried various means of defending himself including prayer, singing happy songs, etc.

One night, when Luther was feeling particularly oppressed by the devil, he famously threw an inkwell at him, and it shattered on the castle wall. Apparently, you can still see the ink-stain to this day.

I don't know if Zachary will be sharing anything quite this exciting in his testimony 😊.

But there is an important sense in which our citizenship in the kingdom of heaven involves resisting and renouncing that which is evil and false and destructive in our world.

To say “yes” to Christ and to his love is to say “no” to all that is unlovely and untrue, in the world and in our own lives.

It is to acknowledge that there are indeed spiritual forces in our world and in our lives that actively oppose the kingdom of God.

I'm not going to ask Zachary to renounce the devil because I think that word suggests all kinds of unhelpful caricatures in our minds (pitchforks and horns, etc.); I *am* going to ask him if he renounces the evil powers in our world and trusts in Jesus.

I think here, too, this question can remind all of us of an important truth in the Christian life. Our “yes” to Jesus involves a “no” to every narrative and every idol and every selfish desire that works against his kingdom.

Does this mean that in renouncing the devil we will never sin again? That we will never act in ways that run counter to Christ's kingdom?

No. Obviously not. We remain fallen human beings, even after we are baptized. But in making these declarations at our baptism we are declaring what we believe to be true about God and what we believe to be true about the task of a human life, even when we fail to live up to it,

It is to set a course and to keep walking.

We're going to transition into the baptism portion of the service by singing a song called “Here I am, Lord.”

It's a song that evokes the story of Moses and other biblical prophets, accepting the call to lead God's people into freedom or to call them back or to simply bear witness to God's purposes in the world.

It's easy to sing the lines of the song and to think, "Well, these are words for leaders, not just regular people like me."

But the call of God comes to each one of us. It doesn't look the same in every life. Some are called to different tasks than others. But each one of us is called to respond to the summons of Christ with our lives.

May God help each one of us to say, "Here I am. I will follow where you lead."

Amen

