

3.13.2022 Lent 2

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Genesis 15:1-2, 17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

“Our Citizenship is in Heaven”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

In the reading from Genesis today, God said to Abram, “*Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them...So shall your descendants be.*” Abram believed God, and “*the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.*” Through faith we are also included in those stars of heaven. Through believing, we are descendants of Abram, or Abraham.

The readings for today encourage us to look toward heaven and remember, as Paul also writes, “*But our citizenship is in heaven.*” Imitating Jesus Christ through lives of faith that seek to do good as we live for our neighbor, we will be counted among the stars and saints of heaven. We will be counted among the citizens of heaven.

During Lent, in the midst of an ongoing pandemic, and now war, today’s readings remind us that we become heirs of God’s kingdom and citizens of heaven by living unreservedly in the cares and concerns of today and tomorrow in imitation of Jesus Christ. Jesus lived to heal the sick and drive out the demons of this world that oppress people. Lent is not simply an old world tradition that we undergo every year. During Lent we are reminded that our very lives are the battleground against the demonic powers of this world, oppressing us and our neighbors. Doing good and living for our neighbor is more important than ever.

Paul’s words about our true citizenship being not here on earth but in heaven, are words to think about during Lent. Paul’s words encourage us to ask ourselves, “Do I have a passport to heaven?” Will I be counted among the stars of the nighttime sky as a descendant of Abraham and a citizen of heaven? We will each spend the greater part of eternity, not here on earth, but in the kingdom of God. The question of our true citizenship is central to our identity as Christians. If our citizenship is in heaven, then we have already been freed to live in our common humanity with and for our neighbor, no matter what our nationality is here on earth.

As a former missionary to Japan, over the years, I have thought a lot about my identity and my citizenship. Living among the people of another nation, with other religions and languages will cause anyone reflect upon their own identity. Of course, I could not have traveled between this country and Japan without a passport. I have used up four passports, which means I have a total of forty years of traveling as a citizen of this nation and passports to show it. I have traveled over the Pacific about eighty times, but I have no illusions about these passports. They allowed me great freedom and entry into foreign lands, but they will not get me into heaven. My passport to eternal life – our passport to

eternal life in the kingdom of God – comes through faith in Jesus Christ and living in imitation of his life. Jesus lived each day for others and so should we.

God's words to Abram about the stars of heaven and Paul's words about our citizenship being in heaven should remind us that over our lifetimes, all earthly rulers, presidents, prime ministers, all of them, will come and go. Since Paul's day, and even Abraham's day for that matter, earthly rulers and their kingdoms have risen and fallen. As a student of history, it has taught me that no one rules absolutely, and no kingdom on earth is eternal.

Like many of you, when I was in high school, I read the poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley titled "Ozymandias," in which a traveler talks about seeing a large, broken and shattered statue half-buried in the desert. The pedestal of this half-buried statue reads, "My name is Ozymandias King of Kings; Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!" Shelley's poem ends saying that nothing remained around the ruins of the half-buried statue except a desert stretching far off into the horizon. Such is the fallen nature of human power and human kingdoms. Leaders may try to assert their earthly power, but they will fall; their statues will be removed or fall into ruin.

I have thought about this poem occasionally over the years because it is a moral tale about human power and earthly kingdoms: they rise and they fall. Shelley's poem is a warning about the worldly power of leaders to the moral hubris of imagining that anything they attempt to build will last into eternity. Jesus came to point to the kingdom of God drawing near to us amidst the kingdoms of this world, its rulers and leaders.

In this morning's gospel, some of the Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "*Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.*" Jesus' reply to them is worth thinking about. Jesus said, "*Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will finish my work.'*" Jesus' reply could be made to every ruler in the world who has sought to oppress and kill the weak and anyone who stands in their way.

Jesus' words continue to speak truth to power: "Go and tell Herod, I am not afraid of him. I will continue to work today and tomorrow; I will work all my life – for all eternity – helping people. I will heal their illnesses and free them from the demonic powers of this world that oppress them. I will even die for them, and even death will not stop me, because on the third day, I will be raised and live on in their hearts, working for all eternity."

I can hear Jesus speaking, not only to Herod, but to any and every ruler of this world who has sought to rule absolutely, "I will work today and tomorrow doing good, healing the sick, and liberating anyone oppressed by evil. I will outlive your attempts to be like Ozymandias. Your statues and empires will lie in ruins as my kingdom continues to spread, living in the hearts of humanity."

Indeed, Jesus has outlived every despot and would-be absolute ruler because Jesus is risen and alive in the hearts of people everywhere who seek to follow him and do good to their neighbor. During Lent, we remember that Jesus comes to each of us inviting us to deny ourselves, take up his cross of suffering and follow him in his struggle against evil in this world. Jesus Christ is the eternal power to live for and to do good in this world. He is risen and lives in every heart that believes in him.

Absolute rulers throughout history have sought to control the hearts and minds of their people. Governments covet the human heart, while also fearing any human heart that seeks to do good by imitating Christ. Governments and rulers want to control the human heart; Jesus comes with grace and peace to liberate the human heart to live freely serving others. With Christ, absolutely nothing can overcome or destroy God's love for this world.

The only things that survive and live on in this world are doing good for others, over and over, as Jesus says, today and tomorrow. Love can never be destroyed. Not even death can destroy love, because God is love. When we imitate Christ, our lives will be completed in his grace and love and we will witness to our citizenship in heaven.

When Paul asked the Philippians to imitate him, he was asking them to imitate Jesus Christ. Paul lived to imitate Jesus, his cross of suffering for others and new life in the Spirit. Imitating Christ means working today and tomorrow for the sick and those oppressed by evil in this world. Paul knew that he was living and working in a world oppressed by an occupying army and government. Paul knew the power of Jesus and his love in a world occupied by evil.

As Jesus replied to Herod, I can also hear Jesus saying throughout history, "Go and tell Nero, and so many others throughout history, the Stalins and the Hitlers: I will outlive you and every attempt to rule and lord over the citizens of this world I so love. Like Ozymandias, your kingdoms will not last."

This Lent, remember that your citizenship is in heaven. Remember that you are counted among the stars of heaven. Remember that to be a Christian means imitating Christ, his cross and his service to others. Faith in God and service to others is the only passport to the kingdom of God. Our earthly passports and their kingdoms will not get us there.

During Lent, look toward heaven and count the stars, by faith you are also numbered among them. Stars shine in the darkness. As Jesus came to be light in a dark world, let your light so shine that others might see Christ's light in you.

Our citizenship is in heaven. Today and tomorrow let Christ's light be at work in you, driving out evil from this world. This is how we become citizens of heaven. Amen.