

The Bencke Family in Japan



September 2022: 95 番



Conference on
Worship,
Theology, and
the Arts

*Scatter the
Imagination
of our
Hearts*



Liturgical art for worship

**Stained glass at Word of
Peace (Rogers, MN)**

This past July, I (Jackie) had an opportunity to attend a conference at St. Olaf College. The intersection of worship, theology, and arts is about a perfect set of topics that I can imagine for the professional development of missionaries. At that point, I had just arrived in the U.S. and was still processing the rather hostile entry we had experienced as we encountered the customs and immigration agents in Seattle. The anxiety and malcontent of people was palpable and very unexpected. I can only imagine what it must be like for those entering the U.S. for the first time and whose “first impression” of Americans was at the border. Admittedly, I was pretty outraged at what I was witnessing.

As I listened to the presenters, however, I felt the Holy Spirit douse me with bucketsful of mercy and grace. I began to see the extent to which this country has experienced trauma and is just so exhausted. I only heard about it – I wasn’t here to feel it or have my eyes, ears, mind and heart assaulted daily with the unfolding suffering that is happening in both the larger American context and even within the communities of faith where we worship.

I was reminded of the Hebrew word for wilderness, which is “midbar.” It is a term derived from “davar” and “diber,” which refer to the spoken word or commandments. The “mi” prefix has a few meanings, but can refer to being “divided” or “separated from.” Certainly it is a fitting metaphor for today’s context to view these past couple of years as a wilderness, where we are increasingly divided, or even separated from both one another, and God at times.

While the idea of “wilderness” or a concept of “wild” (lawless disorder) is not particularly common in Japan, at least not like Americans typically understand “wilderness,” a closer metaphor would be those referencing the sea, such as the large wave depicted in the famous block print (image at the bottom). I imagine that many have seen this picture. It is recognizable and is often referred to as a picture of a Japanese tsunami.

Have you ever noticed that Mt. Fuji is right in the center of this image? Look closely and you’ll see it, far in the background. There are also three boats of people in the image, looking as though they might have their lives flashing before them. They are about to be crushed by this mighty wave of water that seeks to fall back into the sea from where it emerged. Probably all that the people see is the wall of water in front of them, churning and tossing them to and fro. If it were me, I probably wouldn’t notice the massive mountain, stable and unchanging on the safety of the shore.

As Christians, we are not immune to the fragile or tumultuous storms of life. We, like anyone, are often fixing our eyes on the big wave of scariness and instability that is right in front of us, instead of on the rock of ages, unchanging and unshakable that is right there on the horizon. The disciplines of joy and hope are not sentiments, based on our circumstances. They are, in the words of Rev. Willie Jennings, acts of resistance against despair. Joy and hope are both counterintuitive forces, and Christ calls us to a countercultural life.

