

# The Bencke Family in Japan



November 2022: 96 番

## Fast and Furious

No, I'm not talking about the film series....

This is how I would characterize the past six months. So much has transpired, and in retrospect it feels like a blur. The intensity of one moment barely had time to season in our souls before another big thing seemed to be imminent.

The transition back to Japan after our two months of home assignment allowed for exactly zero seconds of time to breathe before fielding an exciting addition to the college chapel. In recent years, the organ that has served as the main instrument used for accompanying hymns has slowly been moving toward her demise. First one of the three keyboards died, then the second became temperamental when seasons or humidity changed, and finally the last keyboard started to complain this past spring during worship services. The writing was on the wall over five years ago, and we finally pulled the trigger in July, purchasing a lovely little Viscount that was installed the day after I returned from the U.S.

To celebrate and give thanks for this acquisition and for the work that went into making the purchase and installation happen, a short ceremony and concert was prepared and we came together as a faculty in early November. This necessitated some serious practice time – a discipline that I had neglected for the past decade or so while I worked on other things. Nevertheless, it was fruitful and the recital was an enjoyable endeavor. We decided that it would be more meaningful to operationalize the idea of being a “mission school” to have a student or two play for the recital, so that made the concert a little more personal.

One week after that, I successfully defended my dissertation and can now put those little letters “Ph.D.” behind my name. It was a two-and-a-half-year journey, with over a million words written in papers (I counted, which is pretty easy to do in Microsoft Word) and discussion boards. The degree is in Christian Worship, with an informal concentration in ethnodoxology.

The weekend following that event, I flew back to Minnesota to retrieve Hannah, who we left behind when Patrick and I returned to Japan. She was able to stay with my brother and his family for about six extra weeks and attend Hastings Senior High School during that time. We continue to feel an overflow of gratitude for their willingness to host Hannah and provide her with a couple of uniquely Minnesotan experiences (the Minnesota Wild game continues to be the highlight when she talks about Minnesota). It was also the very first time (and probably only time) that I was able to go pick up Emilie from campus for a holiday break. It brought back fond memories of ditching college for holidays back in my Gustavus days. What a relief to see the dorms in the rearview mirror as we headed home!

“Home” for us has a complex meaning. We are sent on “home assignment” to

return to the U.S. every two years. Yet I just brought Hannah “home” to Japan last week. When asked difficult questions such as “which do you like better,” or “what do you miss about home,” or “when will you come home,” we are often stumped. Those are questions not easily answered and are opportunities to bear witness to the depth of our relationships and experiences on both sides of the ocean. In both places—Japan and the U.S.—we have things that we dearly love and things that frustrate us to the point of wanting to pack up and move ‘back,’ which is usually wherever we are *not* at that time. It seems to be the human condition of searching for greener pastures.

This searching is not unlike the yearning that we celebrate now in this season of Advent. The waiting, hoping, knowing that there is something better, a better way to minister to our hearts than seeking those things and experiences that are usually temporary salves at best. There is a gorgeous choral piece by Craig Courtney called “The Yearning” that I tend to listen to a few times during Advent. The opening phrase, “There is a yearning in hearts weighed down by ancient grief and centuries of sorrow” speaks to the connection we have with generations long before us, who wrestled with similar ache. And, too, the phrase, “we shall see the One who placed within our hearts the yearning” speaks to how God, from the moment of creation, has built into our DNA a need to connect, encounter, engage, and be united with Him in spirit and in truth.

We both look forward to the forthcoming celebration of the birth of our Savior and Lord even as we also yearn for His coming and remember that in His descending to earth 2000 years ago, his atoning work was accomplished that we may indeed have hope in the home yet to come.

### **Japanese cooking:**

Our oven died last March. The one we had been using was an American-made oven, purchased circa 2001, and fit comfortably into the space, since the house was built when American imported items were easily acquired. Ovens imported from America are no longer reasonably purchased (cost-prohibitive at over \$10,000 per unit!), so this time a Japanese model was installed.



Note that 1) the oven compartment is about 70% smaller than the American range, 2) there is a special compartment for broiling fish between the range and the oven, and 3) there are never more than 3 places to cook on the top of the range. I have yet to learn why that is. Maybe if I read the manual...