

The Bencke Family in Japan



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Left: LeRoy Janes

Right: Janes' students,
1877

Missional life

The Great Commission tends to be used as a basis for Christians' call to mission, and sometimes they are officially deployed as such. Patrick and I are an example of officially deployed missionaries. But missionary life – that is, the evangelistic angle of Christian life – is more than a job description. It is the call we hear at the end of every worship service in an iteration something like, “Go in peace, serve the Lord!” or, “Go in peace, share the Good News!” or, “Go in peace, share the harvest!” and so forth. This is the missional command for us to take the resurrected Christ into our daily worship.

On Thursday, January 29th, Patrick attended the 149th anniversary of the Kumamoto Band. He met our college chaplain (Pastor Choi) at 5:30am and drove to Hanaoka Mountain for a worship service to commemorate the Kumamoto Band. This is not a “band,” as in a musical group or some such thing. The Kumamoto Band, along with the Sapporo Band and the Yokohama Band, were groups of Christians (young men) who had studied western concepts alongside Christianity. It is often said that the Kumamoto Band were known for nationalism, the Sapporo Band for their spiritualism, and the Yokohama Band for their church-centeredness. The veracity of those labels is not etched in stone, but there are interesting stories to support them. I encourage you to go down that rabbit hole!

In the case of the Kumamoto Band, the young men had studied under Captain Leroy Janes. Janes had been a veteran of the American Civil war and was hired by the Kumamoto “government,” a term loosely used in this case, to teach western studies as the country underwent a massive upheaval after the end of the Tokugawa era. Persecution of Christians was still alive and well, but efforts were underway to create more equanimity for western culture (including religions) to be propagated in Japan. Captain Janes taught history, math, and western morals (would love to know a little more about that!), but waited a few years before he started to teach Christianity in earnest. His students were descendants of samurai families and those who became members of the Kumamoto Band numbered about 35. The Hanaoka pledge was basically a confirmation of their faith in Jesus Christ. Many of them became influential leaders in Japan as the feudal system collapsed and a more westernized government was established. They remained strong nationalists and deeply loved their country. These young men had an interesting mixture of fervor in their new Christian faith along with deep, culturally embedded

values attributed to Confucianism. In the 150 years since their baptisms, Japanese Christians have been continuing to figure out how to live truthfully into the gospel message while maintaining their cultural heritage. Japanese contact with Christianity was not because of colonialism, as was the case for much of the world outside of Europe. Therefore, establishing a Christian identity as a Japanese person tends to be quite challenging, since there was never a “Christian West” dominating the culture through the governing agencies.

Captain Janes was not deployed in an official capacity as a missionary, but took seriously the command to go forth and teach. His obedience to living out the Great Commission resulted in powerful life-altering changes in the hearts of many whom he encountered. His life work is worthy of remembering when we think about how we live out our call to mission, wherever our vocations!

Remembering our friend



Left: January 7th marked three years since our beloved friend and Japanese grandfather, Mr. Nishi, passed away. We went over to Mrs. Nishi's home and had dinner with her and some family members who could attend. Prior to eating, though, we went into the tatami room where the family altar is situated. Mrs. Nishi and the daughters had prepared the altar with various gifts they hope he can enjoy in the afterlife (top). Pictures of family members who have long since passed away are hung at ceiling height (middle), and it feels very much like they are looking down at those who are living. Reminded me of the Roman Catholic church where I grew up, where statues of cherubim and saints often “look down” upon the congregants during worship.



When we go into the room, we are very careful about how we present ourselves. As Christians we cannot pray to the altar of Mr. Nishi. Nor can we speak to him in a way that corroborates Buddhist beliefs. Instead, we participate in the memorial by ringing the bowl, praying to our Lord in thanksgiving for Mr. Nishi's life and that we may continue to be faithful to God by supporting and loving his wife and family. We don't bring offerings to the altar, but we bring a bottle of wine to Mrs. Nishi and say something like, “Mr. Nishi would want us to enjoy some wine. Let's remember some stories!” (left two pictures)



It was an evening of laughter and tears. We caught up after what seemed like a (too) busy autumn and reconnected with Mr. Nishi's grandkids who are the same ages as our daughters. Mrs. Nishi is in her mid-80s and continues to work in what she consistently tells us is a fulfilling occupation as a nurse at a hospital nearby.