

The Bencke Family in Japan



May 2025: 108 番



Mt. Unzen, an active volcano that erupted in 1991. You can still see the from the lava and pyroclastic flows. Notably, this volcano also erupted in 1792, triggering a megatsunami that killed over 14,000 people.

A necessary change of perspective

This past spring was a little unusual for our family. Typically, February and March are quiet months for us to catch our breath as the school year closes down. Instead, we had the joyful pleasure of welcoming my sister and her husband to our home in Kumamoto and introducing them to this place that we've called home for 19 years. Experiencing the things that have become "mundane" or "usual" through fresh eyes was thrilling and invigorating for our hearts. We didn't stray too far from our home base in Kumamoto, going only as far as Nagasaki and into the mountains of Saga. Things we had forgotten to be amazed by, be thrilled by, be startled by, roll our eyes at, or examine through a new lens were reintroduced to us through this visit. We had good conversations about everything from board game banter to deep ponderings about life directions.

There's a verse in Ephesians that speaks to the importance of the refreshing of the spirit. "For they refreshed my spirit and yours also." (Eph 16:18) Paul was writing of three early believers (Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus), who may have been siblings, and who had apparently helped the early Corinthians to address some difficult spiritual questions.

Working as a missionary, while not any more or less challenging than living a missional life in one's home culture, has some unique challenges. Honestly, it sometimes feels like being a "welcome immigrant." Discriminatory facets of Japan exist, and it's easy to get tired of it. Even angry. Anything related to bureaucracy is replete with discriminatory rules. It's easy

to get tired of the language barrier. But we press on with our study while simultaneously hoping that our conversation partner doesn't get frustrated with our grammatical or vocabulary mistakes. Ironically, we often need Christian mercy and grace from our non-Christian neighbors. It's easy to doubt your choice to go to a place, even if it was prayerfully considered and mutually desired by the missionary and the receiving partner.

As the political scene in the United States unfolds and the term "immigrant" is tossed about as a casual term to describe everyone from the single mother who walked 400 miles with two children in tow to the members of drug cartels, I pause to consider in what ways I am an immigrant. In fact, aren't we *all* immigrants in some ways? Maybe it's not a national border crossing, but how often do we have to cross into a new or different culture or setting other than our own, comfortable worlds? How are we perceived by our hosts, even after two decades of service? Most of the time, it would seem that most people don't mind if we stay and continue to serve in our college and churches. But, I know that as the tariffs negatively impact Japanese lives, there is an increasing number of folks who would rather see us off at the airport with no plans to return. Yes, despite our opposition to the current government, we are nevertheless the face of the U.S. and are held accountable for the range of things that happen in her borders. Sometimes we, ourselves, desire a change in our circumstances. But what we really need is a change in our perspective.

Fortunately, we are blessed that worship offers this. Worship is where God meets us as we are, not as our perfected selves. We are humbled, realigned, and strengthened for service through the intentional acts of listening, singing, reading, meditating, watching, and praying. All of these "things we do," while wonderful in and of themselves, are perfected as offerings to God through Christ's suffering and subsequent triumph. We are reminded every Sunday morning of the eternal work that is being done even through our trials. We can exit our Sunday morning worship, refreshed and renewed, ready to look at our surroundings with new(er) eyes and an open(er) heart. We don't always need the change in circumstances, but we almost always need the change of perspective that God offers us in Word and Sacrament.

I am so thankful for that visit. Sharon and Bill will probably never know just how much we received by receiving them into our home. Since they visited, we were thrilled to host missionary colleagues who are ending service in Japan, and look forward to hosting a former student and his family in June. We have so enjoyed having new conversations at the dinner table and look forward to more. Let us know if you might wish to join us for dinner someday!



If anyone visits us, we almost always offer the opportunity to climb Japan's longest staircase, which is located about an hour south of Kumamoto in Misato. It has 3,333 steps. Most people don't have too much trouble going up, but going down tends to wreak havoc on the calves of even the most trained athletes. (It took me a week to not cringe every time I had to move my legs!) When we went, we met an 83-year-old man who climbs the staircase twice or thrice, several times a week.