

The Bencke Family in Japan



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My image of sardines



Japanese image of sardines



Years ago, when we were first married, Patrick and I were thrilled when a video store opened near our place here in Kumamoto. This was before DVDs and WAAAY before Netflix. It was a big deal that we could rent 3 whole episodes of “Ally McBeal” on one video cassette. We would search for other older films, knowing that nothing that had come out in the previous 3 years would be available in Japan yet.

There were films that were incredibly hard to find, though. This is because often the films have different names in Japanese than the English rendering. To give a few recent examples, *Frozen* is called “Anna and the Snow Queen” in the Japanese language. The movie *Up* is called “Old Man Carl’s Flying Sky-Flying House.” *Sister Act* is called “Love Song to the Angels.” *Napolean Dynamite* is called “Bus Man.” On the flip side, the Japanese film called (in Japanese) *Seaside Diary* is called “Our Little Sister” in English.

Why did the films get renamed? It has to do with nuance and shading. So many English expressions and idioms have no direct or even close-to-direct translation in Japanese. I remember trying to tell a fellow teacher that my class felt like a can of sardines, with everyone squished together and crowded. That teacher didn’t understand the reference, because sardines are sold in Japan lined up in a neat row, so the image is “neatly organized,” not “crammed together.” Thus, the expression just didn’t translate well. One of my favorite Japanese expressions is “Ni-kai-kara-megurusi,” 二階から目薬、literally, “Second Story Eye Drops.” It means “pointless,” as in trying to have someone put eye drops in your eyes from the second floor.

Imagine, now, trying to explain Jesus’ gospel message, when the word that is used for sin means “crime.” Japanese people are incredibly law-abiding and very enculturated to follow the rules. How can they be guilty of sin (crime)? The parables and myths of western thought, Aristotelian logic and Abrahamic law are not part of Japanese history. What can missionaries do to proclaim the gospel? We seek every way possible to communicate it *in a way that makes sense*. We find the stories that have the message. We find the artwork that speaks to the Japanese aesthetic. We find music that has its DNA in Japanese history. And slowly, slowly, slowly, we proclaim the good news.

Some of the prayers of our hearts...

Thank you, Lord, for your servants in Japan, especially those who are moving to different areas or starting school in different places. We ask for your hand of compassion and peace to be upon each of them as they adjust to their new placements and assignments. May their transitions be smooth, and may they be received in their new homes with grace and warm hospitality.

Lord, we beckon you to bring us rest from all the burdens we are asked to bear. May we remember that our ministries are an act of love and worship, and that in whatever capacity we serve – our families, friends, jobs, church – that our purpose is to make each of those things an offering to you.

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Home assignment:

We were scheduled to return to the United States for a home assignment in 2020. However, due to the travel restrictions in place, all ELCA travel was cancelled. This has continued for 2021, so there will be no home assignment this year either. Japan continues to have incredibly severe travel restrictions for non-citizens like ourselves, and I imagine this will continue to be the case through the fall, until the Olympics are over and until vaccinations are available to all adults. Currently only those who are 75 and older are eligible to receive the vaccine.

Back to in-person classes

Japan continues to be in a difficult position regarding the spread of COVID-19. Kumamoto was just released from strict protocols for being out and about. The college where Patrick and I work was online from the end of April until just this past week, when we returned to classes. It is good to see students again, even with masks!

Family updates

Our daughter, Emilie, successfully completed her first year at St. Olaf college. She was awarded a fellowship with the CURI program to help translate materials and prepare them for inclusion in a textbook that will deal with sustainable agriculture practices in Japan and the U.S.

Hannah is in junior high now, and likes the increased socialization of this season of life. She joined the track team right away and seems to enjoy running up and down the hill 15 times on hundred degree days. She's still young.

Patrick is remaining healthy one year after his fourth heart ablation surgery. Continued monitoring with a cardiologist he likes and respects very much is contributing to a good recovery, I think. He and I even take walks together when the weather is cooperative!

Jackie continues to serve at the college in music and English teaching capacities. Her PhD studies are almost halfway done, with just a couple of classes and writing the dissertation looming large. She recommends making sure there's plenty of [insert vice] on hand if anyone plans to juggle parenting, work, and a terminal degree.

Meditation: Recently we had an infestation of caterpillars on some of the flowers I had planted. They totally decimated the plants and I was pretty upset. I got my can of bug killer spray. However, I thought to myself, "These are bugs that crawl around from day to day in the dirt and dust, are threatened by many natural predators, and really have no way of protecting themselves. They don't seem particularly anxious about their predicament." Considering this for a bit, and pondering the caterpillars' enviable ability to not care about their vulnerabilities, I thought it wasn't so evil that with all they have to endure, they simply ate something that was probably luxuriously delicious. My thoughts softened with that small thought of mercy, and turned to wonder. I wonder if they knew that they have a grand destiny, a destiny built into their DNA, that after feeding on my chrysanthemums, that they would disappear and come back transformed into something beautiful (one of those gigantic black butterflies with an iridescent blue circle on their wings). It reminded me that my luxurious meals should consist more of Scripture, so that I might also be transformed into that which God wills for my DNA.

"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will." Romans 12:2