

The Bencke Family in Japan



September 2021: 89 番



Wandering and wondering:

We recently had a long stretch of torrential rains, leaving a path of flooding and destruction in many parts of Japan. After several days of being closed up indoors, I made an impromptu decision to take a long walk, despite the intermittent downpours. I brought an umbrella but decided that the rain felt really nice and didn't even open it. I was thinking, in fact, "Wouldn't it be nice if there was a place where I could just ditch this thing and walk unencumbered for the next 3km?"

Maybe God interpreted my thinking as a prayer, because after about one minute after thinking that thought, I came to a bus stop where there was an elderly man - probably in his 80's - waiting for a bus, struggling with what was clearly a broken and altogether unusable umbrella. I went up to him and asked if we could exchange umbrellas. He looked at me with suspicion and said, "naze?!" (why?!). I told him that the rain felt so nice, and that I saw that his umbrella was broken and that it was a waste for me to carry my umbrella if I wasn't going to use it. I must have looked pretty convincing, because much to my surprise, he agreed to the exchange. I continued on my way, carrying his broken umbrella for the next 3km, pondering the coincidence of the Japanese word for umbrella (*kasa*) and the Spanish word for house (*casa*: same pronunciation as Japanese). Both imply a sort of protection or covering.

I wasn't able to dump my umbrella as I wanted to and walk with free hands. But God figured out how to show a bit of mercy to one person stuck in the pouring rain while providing an opportunity to engage in a meaningful interaction for me, as I am not particularly fond of engaging in conversation with strangers. God's plans always seem to be win-win in the end.

As gross as the squish of my feet in my shoes felt when I got home, the exercise had felt good and the rain was a refreshing change from the beastly heat of the sun. As I put the broken umbrella in the appropriate bag for disposal, I thought, "I only had to carry a 2-pound broken umbrella for 3km. How much more did the sin of the world weigh when Jesus carried the cross?" and "Does my life reflect Jesus as my eternal *kasa/casa*?"

Some of the prayers of our hearts...

Thank you, Lord, for your provision of opportunities to serve you. While we strive to live in obedience to your call, we ask that you forgive us as we falter and seek our own paths independent of your will. Be with us as we take each breath, each step, and guide our steps in the way that you would have us go.

Lord, we beg for your intervention in the crisis unfolding in Afghanistan and other areas of the world. For those who are suffering, persecuted, unjustly imprisoned or put to death, hungry, exhausted, hopeless, bereaved, Lord we commend each of them unto you. Even if they do not yet know of your love for them, Lord, we ask your mercy and comfort. May we, your servants, and disciples, be open to walking with them in their journey through our abundance. Show us how, Lord. Show us how.

We praise you, Lord, for the hope we have in you. May we honor you in our work, whether our work is as an employee, a student, or in any other formative capacity. May the work of our hands and the words of our mouth always be acceptable to you.

Home assignment 2022

There is talk of resuming home assignment travel in the summer of 2022!

As things unfold with COVID-19 situation, travel restrictions around the world, and budget considerations, we hope to learn more in the coming months about a definitive plan.

Meanwhile, if your congregation is interested in having us come to see you in person, please consider this possibility for next summer!

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COVID-19 in Japan

While the infection rates are nothing compared to what they have been in the United States, Japan continues to be in a difficult position regarding the spread of COVID-19. Tokyo now sends COVID-19 patients to hospitals that are up to six hours away because the hospitals are overloaded and they cannot receive any more patients. Having a shortage of doctors who were “voluntold” by the IOC to work the Olympics did not help the situation. The Paralympics are now taking place and another surge is underfoot. Please continue to hold this country in your prayers.

Cultural interest

Our friends, the Nishis, are diehard fans of sumo. I know nothing of the sport, and have always gracefully declined their offer to come over and watch the tournaments on TV. Sumo has been around for over 1500 years. It is a very ritualistic sport and is deeply rooted in Shinto. Tossing a handful of salt into the ring, for example, is said to purify the ring of evil spirits. (That is often practiced by store owners as well. Before opening the doors for business, an owner will often dump a neat pile of salt right outside the door.) Women are banned from entering or even touching the ring. And those loincloths? They are called *mawashi*. They are not washed until the wrestler retires. They are wiped off, sprayed with alcohol, and put into the sunshine to dry off.