

The Bencke Family in Japan



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Pre-Lent Observations

In just a few days, Christians around the world will begin a period of self-reflection as we honor the time leading up to Jesus' death and resurrection. I am, of course, talking about the period we call "Lent." Interestingly the word "lent" also means something like "to give temporarily." Our observation of Lent is temporary in that we know it will end in a celebration of resurrection. But what happens while we are being "lent" this time from our God?

As a child who grew up in the Roman Catholic church, Lent meant two things: No meat on Friday and no chocolate anything. So what did we (I) do instead? Went to decadent fish-frys and filled up on other forms of junk food. It did not occur to me that the point of giving something up for Lent was not to try find ways around the sacrifice. After all, Jesus could have found away around His death, but instead he chose (very important word) to embrace it as a necessary road toward victory over sin.

Our lives seem to have been inundated with news of suffering and sacrifice in these past few years. There seems to be no way to circumvent the process. We are instead, called to live in the midst of that suffering as faithful witnesses to a God who has never once been derelict in abiding by his promise to always remain *with us*, and dwelling within. It was promised at Baptism and we are reminded of this when we commend our loved ones to complete that Baptismal covenant.

A little over six weeks have passed since our dear friend Mr. Nishi died. We attended all of the funerary rites surrounding his death and had to somehow tangle with the theology of baptism and resurrection while we ministered in friendship to the family through their Buddhist rites. It was complex and I am continuing to reflect on all of it. Was it OK, for example, for me to hold my palms together and bow (called *gassho*) toward Mr. Nishi's casket? In my mind I was thinking, "God my Father, it is into your hands I commend this friend who has died," but to Mr. Nishi's family, were they perceiving this as "Buddhist adherence?" The waters are very muddy here, theologically. It is perhaps in funerary rites that the tendency to blur the theology of Scripture, practice, culture, and Christian faith is most prominent for the missionary in Japan. I wonder what it is like in other non-North-American cultures.

One thing is certain, and that is that Japanese funerary rites offer a much more involved set of rituals and experiences that connect the bereaved to the experience of the deceased. With the “follow-up” rites that occur in Buddhism, there are built-in opportunities to provide emotional or spiritual support for the bereaved, which is not necessarily the case in North American funeral practice. For North American Christians, there is a wake, a funeral, an interment, and maybe a luncheon. After that, though....? ..whereas in Buddhist practice there are certain things that happen along the way that make the contact with death much more tangible, such as how the families take the cremated bones off the tray and put them into an urn, or how seven days following a death, a monk will visit the home and pray sutras. Some of these things now happen in Japanese Lutheran death after the rites were codified in 1996. I wonder if the churches in North America would benefit from understanding practices surrounding death and funerary rites in Japan. It would certainly be a great opportunity for partnership and accompaniment!

I wonder a lot, these days. Difficult realities seem to make me ask important questions about what I believe and how I bear witness to those beliefs. Here are some pictures from the various parts of the funerary rituals for our friend:



(Left above)

This is the “hall” where the wake and the funeral take place. The cremation and all rituals associated with that are off site at a city facility. In the front are basins where those gathered will offer incense at certain points during the rites.



(Left below)

The fruit basket is an offering that is made to help Mr. Nishi proceed into the afterlife. His picture, of course, is at the top of the altar.



(Above)

Contrary to being cold concrete facilities, the site for cremation is very aesthetically appealing. Even beautiful. One enters at a certain door as seen above, and exits through a different area of the building. This is for spiritual reasons.

(Above left) Prior to cremation, we put words of thanks to Mr. Nishi, written on special paper, into the casket around his face and on his chest.

(Below) We also put flowers into the casket. Our daughter, Emilie, of course, was unable to travel to Japan because of the strict policies of entry. However, about four or five years ago, she had given him a friendship bracelet that she had made. Mr. Nishi put it on at that time and never took it off! So, on Emilie's behalf, Hannah put the bracelet into the casket while Patrick and I put flowers in.

