

The Bencke Family in Japan



January 2019- 73 番



Kuwamizu Lutheran Church:

Each week during advent, at Kuwamizu Lutheran Church, the congregation is invited to come up and hang decorations on the tree. The first week, apples are hung. The second, flowers. The third week, pretzels. The fourth week, the star is placed on top of the tree.

As I write this article, I am sitting in a tiny waiting room in a dingy building in downtown Fukuoka. Our oldest daughter is taking the ACT test in a (hot) room that is 10 x 15 feet at most, along with 5 other test-takers. Over the past ten days, Emilie finished a week of midterm exams, which count toward 50% of her course grades, and prefectural standardized exams, which have some bearing on her eligibility for Japanese colleges, and now the ACT test, which of course holds a lot of weight when considering her options for college in the U.S.

The Japanese education system puts its students through a rigorous testing process, starting from elementary school, increasing in frequency and intensity all the way through high school. What you read or hear about Japan schools teaching to the test is absolutely true. There are classes and courses and cram schools specifically designed to help students pass various kinds of tests. What I didn't know until Emilie was in high school is that the exams are specifically designed for the average student's score to be 50%, reflecting a bell curve. When a class average is 60% or more, the exams are said to be too easy.

The extensive rigor of test preparation is truly boggling, and as parents, we often question whether we are doing right by Emilie by submitting her to this system. As missionaries in a city that doesn't have an international school, we had to decide early whether Emilie would pursue her secondary education in the Japanese system, or if we would send her to an international school where she would be a boarding student for six years. We chose the former. It's easy to second guess ourselves when the going gets tough, or when we are criticized either subtly or directly. We second guess our motivations, our intentions, our devotion, our wisdom; especially since we don't have experience walking in shoes like those Emilie must wear.

This past year has been particularly demanding for our family, as various and unexpected circumstances seemed to crop up almost

Some of the prayers of our hearts...

We pray for those in Indonesia who have lost their homes, family and friends, in the recent tsunami. May the grace of God be poured out upon this nation that has endured so much suffering.

We pray for the people who continue to live in communities devastated by war and violence. May their prayers for peace and healing be answered.

We pray for our families and friends who continue to support our family while we enter our 13th year overseas.

We pray in thanksgiving for our students, young adults seeking their path at Kyushu Lutheran College. May they find that star that guided many to a baby in Bethlehem that night 2000 years ago.

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weekly. These were things that we were unprepared for, situations that we didn't see coming or were not on our radar, and it seemed like as we were completing one challenge, another would crop up. Individually, they were manageable. But without a margin of time to recover, perhaps heal, make sense of things, it's like an intense period of examinations in a Japanese education system, where it simply seems like we just need to push through it to pass the test, regardless of the quality of our work. In the end, how does our score actually reflect our abilities and skills? I have found my courage weak at times. My belief that God will provide that healing, and courage to trust that He is walking right there, and the strength to remember that He walked a bitter road to Calgary in order to pay the price for my unbelief, wavered.

There is a beautiful hymn by Keith and Krysten Getty called "I will wait for you," based on Psalm 130. As we wait for His coming this advent season, I'd like to share a little section of the lyrics:

Now He has come to make a way
And God Himself has paid the price
That all who trust in Him today
Find healing in His sacrifice
I will wait for You
I will wait for You
Through the storm and through the night
I will wait for you
Surely wait for you
For Your love is my delight
https://youtu.be/2aWdSRrW_4

God's love is steadfast and enduring in strength. This Advent season, I pray for each of you to feel that peace of surrendering to that promise. Maybe it will be in the quiet of an evening fire. Or the purple and pink of a cold dawn. Or maybe in the quiet of your workspace. Enjoy the beautiful music and text.

November music highlights:

In late November we held a special worship service at the college that featured some interesting music. One of my juniors played "Canon in D" on the Japanese koto, and senior student Nagata-san sang a contemporary hymn that was composed in a Japanese traditional matsuri-style. A third musical piece was performed by a trio of super-dedicated junior hand bell students who wanted to do something a little above and beyond the call to duty. Normally I don't get a lot of feedback for the music worship services, but this time, perhaps due to the inclusion of Japanese koto, teachers and staff seemed genuinely pleasantly surprised and moved during the worship service.

Japanese koto:

<https://youtu.be/bcaSNsrC2ys>

Christmas service highlights:

This past week, we held our annual Christmas service at the college. There were moments of delight, introspection, and comfort. Here are two selections that came out fairly well in the video-taking process. The first is of three junior students who have enjoyed performing together since they were freshmen. The second is of the hand bell team doing an arrangement of "Wizards in Winter" as the recessional for the service.

<https://youtu.be/0qO4UCldK1s>

https://youtu.be/gPfxLa_Cu_A