

The Bencke Family in Japan



March 2019- 74 番



Simple thoughts

Here in Japan, the New Year is a major holiday, replete with Shinto and Buddhist customs to commemorate the start of a new year. For example, drinking a special sake, in a special cup, holding the cup in a particular way, drinking the (one tablespoonful) of sake in three sips, and closing the hands together after drinking are customs that hold a variety of meanings, most of which point to a prayer for maintaining health and good relationships.

I don't know that prayers are a big part of New Year traditions in the States, but certainly making New Year's resolutions is common. Making plans, committing to positive changes, and starting fresh all seem to revolve around distancing oneself from the past (presumably negative things or habits we wish to move away from) and edging onward into the future. This is all good. I do it, too, every year. But this year, I decided that I would start the year not by looking back on all the negative baggage of the last year, or even trying to imagine a better version of myself in the future, as much as simply reflecting on the present. What questions did I have for myself at this point in life about life, relationships, work, God's intentions, etc.?

I didn't really plan to come up with any definitive answers. I mainly just wanted to explore those thoughts and questions, uninhibited by time. So, on January 2nd, I hiked up Mount Iida for the first time, with a good friend, saw some interesting things, and had some thoughts that weren't necessarily new, but that were good reminders.

About halfway up the mountain, there is an old Buddhist temple – dated around 580 A.D. The original lord of the area of the temple was a shogun of Korean descent, and was asked to advise the emperor about methods of peaceful defense of Japan. After the shogun died (assassinated, ironically), the temple was built to honor the memory of the shogun who imparted messages of peace during his lifetime.

The entrance to the temple is rather interesting in that you are greeted by two 6 ft. tall red devil statues. I don't know, maybe they were supposed to

Some of the prayers of our hearts...

We rejoice for new opportunities to live out our faith. New relationships, new experiences, new perspectives - each offers us a chance to be intentional about being the change agent this world so desperately needs.

We pray for our partner congregations. This year's winter has been difficult, and we pray that the sanctuaries of our churches are a blessing to those who need to have a warm place, or who need the warmth of human connection.

We pray for people in leadership – in our jobs, in our communities, and in our sanctuaries. May those who are in positions of authority hear the voices of their constituents and respond in actions of love and mercy.

We pray for our daughter, Emilie, who is entering the 'launch' season. As she prepares to make big decisions about her future, we pray that the God of wisdom and grace guides her heart and mind.

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Just for fun: I teach “English Pronunciation” to sophomore students. This year, I incorporated a puppet/prop to help students better visualize and understand the mechanics of creating the TH sound, which is so difficult for Japanese speakers. They loved it!



represent something nice, but given their facial expressions, it didn’t feel that way, and I didn’t feel very inclined to enter the temple area, but I took a deep breath, looked at the ground as I passed through the gate, and nothing horrible happened.

The thing is, I’m not a superstitious person. But it felt very strange to enter what I know is (or was) a sacred area while scary statues stared down upon me. It made me wonder what it feels like for Japanese non-Christians to be faced with the crucifix or the cross (which was used for crucifixions here in Japan, too, during the Edo period), and it deepened my understanding of how perplexing it must be for Japanese non-Christians to look at western art depicting crosses, crucifixes, crowns of thorns, angels, devils, halos and religious attire and wonder what it all means. I should not assume that artwork, images, and stories are familiar, and that they might evoke unexpected (or unintended) feelings. The red devil statues certainly evoked something uncomfortable in me...



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqIUczwah1I>

Once I passed through the gate, there was an enormous bell. The sign next to the bell indicates that the sound resonates for a long time, and that one should ring the bell one time only. I didn’t see the sign until after I had rung the bell three times. Oops. I hope I didn’t offend anyone. I felt quite sheepish and awkward. I have a better understanding of how awkward and insecure non-Christian Japanese must feel when they attend a church service. All the rules, suggestions, cultural norms that exist even within the context of one congregation must be overwhelming. I should make a better effort to make newcomers feel more comfortable. The sound of this video hardly does the bell justice, but perhaps you’ll enjoy listening to the rich tone of this 1500 year old bell. (My friend Beth is the star player.)

Beyond the main temple area, before heading up the final leg of the mountain, there was a small cemetery where graves dating back to 700 A.D. dotted the landscape. This modest gravestone appeared to have a few tenants, perhaps a family grave. I kind of like cemeteries. They are generally quite peaceful places.



As my friend and I quietly walked through this cemetery, I considered that none of these people ever would have heard of Jesus. No Christian missionary set foot in Japan until almost 1000 years after these people were buried. I don’t know the theology of salvation for those who haven’t been exposed to the gospel, but I like to think that even though Jesus hadn’t been introduced to Japan while these people were living that perhaps He walked within and among them, unrecognized as the Prince of Peace. I meditated on how blessed I am to know Him.