

The Bencke Family in Japan



January 2021: 85 番

Upper left:
Sophomore Early Childhood Development major & choir student, *Kanna*, as "John"



Upper right:
Junior English major & organist, *Haruka*, as "Luke"



Lower left:
Sophomore Psychology major & organist, *Shiyuri*, as "Mark"



Lower right:
Sophomore Psychology major and choir student, *Momoka*, as "Matthew"



Some of the prayers of our hearts...

Come to our side, Lord, as many individuals, families, displaced people, refugees, and missionaries around the world prepare to celebrate this holiday far away from loved ones, many who have not had a chance to go "home" because of COVID-19 related restrictions or due to unrest. You have prepared our hearts during this Advent season to receive You in the form of a baby. Remind us through our neighbors and those in our bubbles that you are Immanuel, God with us, and are the source of the love we have for family and friends.

Thank you, Lord, for sustaining us through this difficult era in human history. Lord, continue to guide us through this valley and be our strength and courage during these tumultuous and unsteady times.

What would your gospel say?

In Japan, it is a strong tradition to hold "Bou-nen-kai" at the end of the year. These are sort of "bury the hatchet" work parties, and the Kanji characters are 忘年会: "Forget the year parties." 忘 (to forget) includes two characters – 亡 (death) and 心 (heart).

Despite the world's collective desire to forget all that was 2020, there is a truth to *forgetting* that means a part of the heart experiences death. When we remember, we honor what has risen from the ashes of those painful or life-changing experiences. We are also able to see, in 20/20 hindsight (believe me, I see the irony there), how Jesus was written into our stories the entire time.

The college where Patrick and I serve, Kyushu Lutheran College, has established a tradition of offering a Christmas worship service that is replete with lots of music, color, corporate prayer, the gospel story, processions, candlelight, and all those components that many Christians expect to experience in a "Christmas worship" service. So, what happens when big groups can't gather together for rehearsals and space is limited so that social distancing is impossible for a congregation or a musical group? The answer will vary from congregation to congregation, but when we were making plans (last July) about what to do, we decided to pare down all of the "big group" activities, including the congregational singing, choral participation, handbells, processions, organ accompaniment, and anything that would be considered "risky." And then we considered the possibility of doing a pageant.

Students in our chapel committee had never heard of such a thing, and besides musical direction, I have never been the point-person for a show, so it was grassroots performance education for everyone. I told students that we would need a set that included something like a stable and something that would make me think "desert." I said, "We'll need costumes." And the students went to work! The cast members were thrilled to do something totally different and they really honored the parts they played.

The pageant script I chose was "The Christmas story according to the four disciples." (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). One complication with this script was that Matthew and John really didn't say much, if anything, about the story of Christ's birth. In fact, most folks (except your pastors!) probably don't know all that much about the people who wrote those gospels (including me), so understanding the nuance of the characters for these Japanese students was an incredible feat. Together, they told the story of Christ's birth from their vantage point of what is important to know about Jesus. John, for example, who didn't write about the birth of Jesus, felt that it was important to convey that Jesus was the Word, the Light, and God Himself. Matthew wanted to convey Jesus' birth as God's glory with majesty, pomp, and lots of elite people. Luke wanted to tell the whoooooole story, starting with John the Baptist, and Mark really wanted to cut to the chase and talk about Jesus' work.

It got me to thinking, if I wrote a testimony to Jesus' life, character, teachings, and works, what would it say – about the year 2020, or the years 1970-2021? I'm not a big enthusiast of New Year's Resolutions, as it always seems like self-improvement is a moving target, but I do like the idea of setting aside some time specifically for considering how Jesus impacts my life daily, and how I testify to that (or how I fail to do so).

May each of you experience the gospel every day of 2021, and may your testimony be alive and full of hope of the Living God.