

Greetings everyone, and Happy New Year!

I hope this message finds you well, perhaps enjoying some football today, or televised parades. The Benckes enjoyed a relaxing evening with some friends (playing "Mystery of the Abbey") and chatting until the wee hours of the morning. Good to know that even at our age, we can still stay up past midnight! Following is the first newsletter of the 2008. Lots of exciting news to report! 2008 will be exceptionally busy for us, especially as we prepare for our two-month home assignment in July/August.

Eight Baptisms!!

Last week at Murozono Church, where we attend worship on Sunday mornings, eight individuals were baptized. This is huge news! One family of three was baptized together, along with a child, some young adults, and one blind man who appeared to be in his late 80's or early 90's. Patrick served communion that day and said that it was incredibly moving to be the one to serve these people their first Holy Communion bread. For the most part, churches in Japan tend to hold baptisms on Christmas and Easter.

Christmas in Japan - 2007

This year, we got December 24th off of work. That wasn't because it's Christmas Eve, but because the Emperor's birthday, which is on December 23rd, fell on a Sunday. Therefore the following day was observed as a national holiday. Christmas Eve and Christmas Day are regular work days for people. Even on our campus, meetings were held and people reported to work as usual, although the pace was a little slower due to students being on winter break.

Christmas is celebrated in Japan on Christmas Eve with "Christmas cake," which is generally a round sponge cake decorated with (white) whipped cream, strawberries or other red fruit, and candy decorations. Colonel Sanders (and a large bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken) and Santa Claus clearly trump the celebration of Christ's birth. For reasons that continue to baffle me, Kentucky Fried Chicken is a pretty popular dinner item for Christmas Eve dinner. Gifts are exchanged within some families or sometimes between friends.

We celebrated Christmas at the college with a special service featuring the reading of the Christmas story, the singing of carols, and the choir performing . It was hectic preparing for it, but in the end, I think it was a meaningful experience all involved and for those who attended.

On Christmas Eve night, we went to Murozono church, where we sang many familiar Christmas Carols in Japanese and enjoyed a classical guitar player who came and played as a special guest. It was a nice change from the traditional sounds we hear at Christmas time. After the Japanese service, we sped off to Suidocho for the 9:30 pm English Christmas Eve service. Patrick gave the message, as there were no pastors available for that evening. In hopes of augmenting the worship experience for Japanese speakers, we did all of the Christmas carols in both English and Japanese. This turned out to be a good move, as almost half of the congregation was Japanese!

On Christmas Day, we hosted an open house potluck at our house, which was open to our entire English service congregation. Most of the foreign community brought traditional foods and we shared a wonderful time together. For many of the Japanese folks who came, it was their very first Christmas party!

Oh, and of course, Santa did come to our house...!