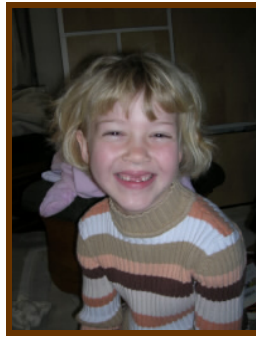


The Bencke Family in Japan

Volume 16, December 12th, 2008



Our two munchkins. Believe it or not, on Emilie's Christmas list this year, two front teeth' are not nearly as desired as anything having to do with the movie, "High School Musical." Hannah will be happy with lots of milk and her pacifier. Wish she could remain this easy to please forever.... ☺ Since there are two faculty meetings at the college on Christmas Day, we will have to be creative about how and when we celebrate the holiday.

Transition.....transition! (sung to the tune of "Tradition" from Fiddler on the Roof)

Emilie, Hannah and I returned to Kumamoto on November 12th, exactly one month ago. Many have asked about the travel. The plane ride itself wasn't too bad. As long as Hannah had access to milk, she was fine. Emilie was a trooper the whole time, fielding a wide variety of emotions, such as dealing with her sadness of leaving Nanny and Grandpa, being excited to see Daddy, the stress of traveling, and also coping with a stubborn cold. Getting through customs and immigration was quite smooth, considering that we had thirteen pieces of luggage when you count the car seat, stroller, and carry-ons. Hannah's luggage trumped ours by almost two to one. Patrick met us in Tokyo, which was helpful beyond words.

What now? While the initial few days were very difficult, things are much better now. We are on a fairly regular schedule and I'm getting more comfortable with the changes I've had to make, such as taking a leave from teaching at the college until April and lightening up on my responsibilities at the two churches we serve until I'm done nursing. I'm also finding that directing the portions of Emilie's homeschool education is challenging and consumes large chunks of my time and energy. Patrick's responsibilities remain largely the same, although coming home to three females, all with varying needs must present some new challenges for him.... ☺

Emilie is doing better at school. Her transition back into a Japanese elementary school after spending two months in an American elementary school proved to be more challenging than all of us thought. Many folks say how children are very resilient and can deal with change well. Emilie is no exception. However, that resiliency often has some hidden costs that are not always evident right away. In Emilie's case, she is now more keenly aware of how different she is from her classmates and is a bit sensitive about it. We continue to work with her on how to balance culturally-appropriate behavior and attitudes with her American cultural foundation, which is no small task, and sometimes the questions are hard to answer. Please pray for her to this end. Emilie is looking forward to celebrating Christmas with her little sister this year, and I'm enjoying watching the two of them create a beautiful bond of love and affection. Emilie has a special ability to make Hannah smile!

Prayer requests:

Please join with us as we pray with praise and thanksgiving...

•October – thanks be to God for Patrick's safe return to work and for the fellowship of those around him while he endured 3 weeks away from his wife and two daughters!

•November – thanks be to God for our safe passage from the U.S. back to Japan and for the angels along the way who helped make the journey manageable.

•December – we pray for those of us who have been affected by this year's economic downturn. May we continue to find prosperity in spiritual things and hope in the One who is the real Commander in Chief.

•December – for missionaries serving in places far from home, and especially for those who may feel the sting of loneliness this holiday season. May God place people in their lives who will be willing to minister to those needs for companionship.

•December – for those who have returned from India for the JELC work camp. May their hearts and minds be focused on how they may continue ministering to the poorest of the poor, even while they are back in their home country.

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www.elca.org/missionsponsorship

Did we miss anyone?

If you know anyone who might like to receive our newsletters, please have them send us an e-mail requesting to be added to our mailing list.

ELCA— Global Mission

If you are interested in learning more about the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's global mission, please visit:
www.elca.org/globalmission

JELC: Mission in India

If you wish to support the efforts of the Comprehensive Rural Health Project in Jamkhed, India, please send donations to Rev. Twila Schock (address above). **Please make sure to mark donations as "Level 2 funding (JELA): Helping Children in Need."** A gift of \$25 will buy materials for an artificial leg for someone who cannot afford that expense on his/her own. We are thrilled that this year some college students from Kumamoto went to Jamkhed as a part of the work camp! These students called the trip 'life changing.'

Hannah is doing fine. Not too much to say except that she's growing. I laughed out loud at a recent checkup because the nurse measured Hannah's length three times as she couldn't believe how long Hannah was. Since the charts are based on Japanese growth standards, Hannah's length didn't fit within the box. She was literally off the charts!

Throughout these past few weeks we have had the magnificent blessing of our Japanese friends, who have stepped up to the plate in a mighty way to make sure we are settling in ok. Many recognized and acknowledged the difficulty of raising children without the luxury of family close at hand. They have ministered to us in ways that humble us. In this season of advent, as I prepare my heart for the coming of our Savior, I find myself in a heightened sense of wakefulness. More than 'not being sleepy' (which is *far* from the case), it's a sense of being very aware of the blessings surrounding us in friendships both here in Japan and in the States.

Seasonal celebrations

Japanese are very aware of seasonal changes and celebrate the changes quite deliberately. In the late fall, early winter, there is an activity called *mochi-tsuki*, literally 'the making of pounded rice cakes.' Last year at this time, when I was running (an activity that seems very foreign to me right now), I would see people gathered at parks or other small, public places, doing *mochi-tsuki*. It's a way for folks in the neighborhood to get together and make a traditional food as well as get some fresh air and get to know any new folks in the neighborhood.

We had our neighborhood *mochi-tsuki* last weekend. At 7am, in temps hovering around 30 degrees, the neighborhood got together and pounded rice and made huge pots of soup. There were probably 50+ people there throughout the morning. Because I was confined to the house for so much of last spring, it was my first opportunity to meet and greet many of the people who live in our immediate neighborhood, which was wonderful.



Patrick and Emilie are taking turns pounding the rice with a wooden hammer. The rice is in the cement basin. One challenge is to pound the rice without chipping the wooden hammer and getting wood splinters in the rice!