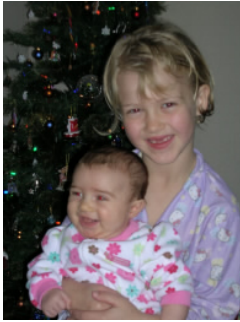


The Bencke Family in Japan

Volume 17, February 23rd, 2009



This was an eventful Christmas, as you can imagine. Of course, being Hannah's first Christmas, she had no idea what was going on. Emilie was eager to help her open her presents.

It's always a bit of a milestone when kids learn how the world works. For us, this meant that Emilie finally learned the "truth" about Santa Claus. She was admonished, of course, from disclosing this information to Hannah. Within a few weeks, Emilie put two and two together and realized the truth about the Easter Bunny and tooth fairy as well.

Hannah is growing and changing. She loves to play with her diaper changing pad, the laundry basket, and her feet. And, she attacks a spoonful of rice gruel like a hungry shark. It seems that in her mind a good day is plenty of Mom's milk, lots of time in someone's arms, and a brightly colored toy to look at and drool on.

Stretching our hands across the ocean

Last night, we had an unusual English service at Suidocho church. The service form was different than the typical. Perhaps you may remember, many of the members of our English service congregation are from Africa. These folks are here as single folks and as families, some of them on scholarship to study medicine or engineering or other fields not readily available in their home countries. We have representation from Uganda, Tanzania, Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe. As you probably know, all of these countries are suffering from economic oppression, AIDS, war, droughts, or other circumstances that make life very difficult.

In an effort to reach out in a tangible and practical way, we held a service that was dedicated to ministering to our African brothers and sisters. The prayers, music, message and special offering were especially geared toward considering the needs of Africa and a second collection was taken to offer assistance to these folks. It was a joyful celebration with uncharacteristic dancing, ululations, and languages (we did some Swahili and Shona music and heard the Lord's Prayer in Swahili). It was such an uplifting service that I think few noticed that it was pouring rain outside.

I was reminded of a term I studied in my ethnodoxology-related courses called "heart language." How incredibly meaningful it is to be able to offer up prayers and song in your heart language! I know for our family, when we returned to the U.S. for home assignment, one of the greatest things was to be able to worship in English. I can only guess that for a brief moment, how incredibly powerful it was for our African friends to be able to stand next to Japanese, American, Canadian, or Australian brothers and sisters and offer hymns and prayers in Shona, Swahili or Lingalan. Their faces were absolutely illuminated throughout the service. I feel blessed to have been a part of that.

Here is the prayer that one member read for us that I'd like to share with you:

O Jesus, remember those who groan under the burden of anguish and sorrow. Bless, O Lord, the children in Africa. Dry their tears, bring hope into their hearts, health and safety into their lives, food and water for their nourishment. Bring peace to their countries and still the guns of war. Generate in us an enthusiastic heart to reach out in a spirit of love and compassion. Do not let us fail to remember our blessings and how we can stretch our hands across the oceans as you stretched out your arms on the cross. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ.

Prayer requests:

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

•January – For a restful and enjoyable New Year's holiday, we are thankful.

•February – For senior students at the college, as they prepare for graduation, may the seeds of hope in Jesus Christ that have been planted throughout their time at KLC continue to grow even as they leave the Christian environment at campus.

•March – we pray for Emilie as she concludes her first year of elementary school in Japan. May she continue to build meaningful friendships and be a firm witness to the reasons why our family is in Kumamoto.

•February – for our family, as we struggle with some of the stresses of everyday life as foreigners in Japan, including mountains of paperwork for visas, maintenance of licenses and international registrations, for both here and in the U.S., applications for daycare, taxes, and the stress of a car purchase (our van died about two weeks ago). May we persevere and not count these as 'costs' of living in Japan but rather as challenges that empower us to continue to witness.

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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.'

Our young witness

I'd like to paraphrase a little of a message preached by Patrick recently at our English service.

Our daughter, Emilie, recently turned seven years old, and to celebrate, I allowed her to invite a couple of friends over for cake and playtime. (The kids had never experienced angel food cake, so this was a little 'cultural outreach' as well!) She invited one little girl whom I like, and a little boy whom... well... is a WILD boy. He's usually got two streams of goo coming out of his nose, has no manners, doesn't listen, etc. It was the "etc." that had both Patrick and me a little concerned.

Anyway, what could we say? We couldn't just say 'no.' So these two kids came over, and sure enough, the little boy was jumping on furniture, standing on the table, and eating his cake on the couch with crumbs falling everywhere. Eventually, the kids went home. Later, Emilie confided to us that this little boy has no friends at school. He is intensely picked on, bullied, and often reprimanded by the teacher. Emilie wants to be his friend not just because he is so wild (and 'funny,' she says), but because I think she wants to offer him some grace and companionship that appears to be lacking in his life. This appears to be a trend in the friendships she has in Kumamoto. As Patrick reminded us all in his message, who are we to draw fences around our hearts and determine who is worthy of our friendship and grace and mercy?

Tomihiro Hoshino

For those of you who enjoy poetry and artwork, especially material that is off the beaten path, I'd like to introduce you to a Japanese poet/artist, Tomihiro Hoshino. When he was 20 years old or so, he was in a trampoline accident that left him paralyzed from the neck down. Despite the devastating nature of such a horrible accident, Hoshino became a Christian several years after his accident while in the hospital. He learned to write Japanese characters and paint exquisite watercolors with a brush in his mouth. Many of his works are simple but richly profound.



Let's go up to the mountain and see the scenery You created.

Are there any fences around the flowers?

Are there any guard rails on the top of the cliff?

Yet, I'm guarding myself with fences around my small heart.