



Sarah on the twenty-second story balcony of a friend's apartment.

ELCA Global Missionaries in Japan

THE WILSON FAMILY

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What a ride 2020 has been. When I (Andrew) last wrote in July, we were coming out of covid wave one and into a resurgent race rhetoric in the USA. An embattled America has survived, for now, a stupefying presidential election, and 2021 promises to be not as bad—or at least not as surprising—than last year.

Precedent?

But who knows what the future will hold. I've just finished reading a stellar book, grounded in the world of late antiquity. That is, the world of emergent Christendom, which saw the slow decay of Rome and its replacement by a novel civilization that worshiped a defeated outlaw and claimed that poverty was the

face of divinity. Tom Holland's [*Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*](#) certainly complicates any hope we may have of predicting the future. As hinted by the (necessarily melodramatic) subtitle, he offers an argument from the very *longue-durée*. Starting with Persian Zoroastrians, and ending with the 9/11 suicide bombers, Holland shows again and again just how startling and unlikely our current obsession with equality, rights, and civic responsibility is. The very fact that we can and do *religiously* criticize our leaders for duplicity and careless disregard for the powerless cannot be taken for granted.

Holland traces it all to the unsettling divinization of the crucified and resurrected man, Jesus Christ, and the widespread worship of such an unlikely hero. And to the haunting words this Jewish messiah left behind: condemning the rich to struggle through needles' eyes, while the poor sit enthroned at God's

right hand. Even our Western atheists vie against God and his followers in a most Christian way; even the “religions” of the world are somehow marked by Christianity’s own definition of what counts as “religion.” In short, though Holland’s book is by no means evangelical on purpose, he shows with ample and entertaining evidence just how far and wide our Lord’s message has penetrated, all outward forms to the contrary. None of this was expected.

Travel

Between the epidemic waves (far less hysterical in Japan than in the US), we managed to get away a couple of times. In August we flew up to Hokkaido, where we were able to visit the lavender fields of Furano and an onsen in Daisetsuzan national park. And we saw these Easter Island imitations wearing giant masks in a cemetery south of Sapporo.



More recently, we finally made a visit to

the former capital, Kyoto, usually crawling with tourists but now delightfully calm.



Teaching

But most exciting is that, after two full years of language study, I've finally started to teach! At Japan Lutheran Seminary I've been teaching the second year students “History of Theology 4” (歴史神学 4), which covers everything after the Reformation. I really enjoy introducing this period of massive intellectual foment: the Thirty Years’ War, classical liberalism and totalitarianism, science in several faces, nationalism and communism, evolution and fundamentalism, colonization and liberation, emancipation and civil rights, global mission and waves of revivalism. Theologians and pastors have had to speak the Christian tradition continually as the world shifted — and still shifts — beneath us. Caught in our current age of social media enervation, this course offers some tonic perspective.

This is all difficult to express, even in English, and I have been constantly saved by the missionary-kid-turned-pastoral-candidate David Nelson, who proffers on the spot interpretation. I'm far from fully fluent in Japanese, but I seem to be stumbling forward, anyway.

Given the current circumstances, I've been fortunate up to now to teach my seminary class in person. But as I write, wave three of the pandemic is sweeping through Japan, and school president Ishii has ordered distance learning for the remaining two weeks of the semester.



I had a trial run through the Fall, however, as I guest-taught (in English) an Intro to Christianity course next door at International Christian University (ICU). This cosmopolitan, polyglot group of students from Mexico, France, China, Germany, Australia, US, India, Korea, Japan, and elsewhere got a crash course in the whole of Christianity. And I got a crash course in Zoom and Moodle (our "Course Management Software"), on which I posted quizzes and pre-recorded

lectures. We managed well enough, I think.

Most of these students had no previous exposure to Christianity at all, with few or no prejudices to be overcome. So I had to constantly roll back my references and rhetoric to make sense. The most successful assignment was a "Window into Christian Worship," in which different groups watched online worship services from one of diverse Christian traditions, from Ethiopian Orthodox to Neo-Pentecostal; they then presented condensed summaries of their experience to their classmates. What a ride!

By the end, though, we were all completely sick of Zoom, and my students' brains were fried from constant screens and little change of context. Their faces slowly zombified as the term went on. Psychologists claim that less than 10% of what is communicated comes in words. A bit more comes through video, I suppose. But I think we're all discovering how thin a substitute it is for real interaction. Anyone who thought a university, or seminary, is only about information transfer, and that it could be easily digitized, is getting a crash course in reality. We're all learning just how much we don't know about the vague and vast

world subsumed under the rubric of "education."

Church

We've been fortunate as well to be able to worship in person for 7 months running. Communion was reintroduced a couple of months ago, and attendance at Tokyo Lutheran has even increased.



Christmas was full of candlelight and carols. And even now, the new year promises new hope, new beginnings, and new chances for us all to share the good news which has been handed down to us, of Christ, come to save; of Christ, victorious in defeat.

Many blessings to you all.

—Andrew L. Wilson



Thanks for your Prayers & Support!

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You can also follow Sarah's theology podcast "Queen of the Sciences" and subscribe to her "Theology & a Recipe" newsletter on her website, www.sarahhinlickywilson.com.