

ELCA Global Missionaries in Japan

THE WILSON FAMILY



March/三月 2020

Take a closer look at the photo above, the white disc in particular. Do you see it? Or rather, him? There's an image of the crucified Jesus. It appears only when a bright light is shined through the black disc in front, which under ordinary circumstances looks just like a mirror, hence the name 魔鏡 (*makyō*) in Japanese, "magic mirror." The technology to create this effect is extremely old, [dating back to China](#) before the time of Christ. But it was put to



unprecedented effect during the long period in which Christianity in Japan had to go underground on account of persecution. The “magic mirror” was one of a number of ingenious ways the believers could keep images to sustain their faith without being caught and punished.

It often feels like Christianity in Japan is still something of a hidden, underground phenomenon. Certainly not due to persecution—don’t get that idea at all! We are extremely grateful for the legal protection of religion here so we don’t have to face any of the impossible choices of martyrs from days past.

But there are other obstacles to the spread of the gospel, as even those of us who live in historically Christian countries have come to understand. By now Andrew and I have met a lot of other missionaries in Japan, from a wide swath of denominations, and from all of them we hear the same thing. People are Christian-friendly. The Bible is a bestseller. Locals will come to English-language Bible studies for years on end. But becoming Christian, getting baptized, making public the faith that may be kindling in their hearts? Rarely, if ever. Slowly, if at all. It’s extremely easy to get discouraged.

Long-term missionaries seem to appreciate us in part because we haven’t been here long enough to have fallen prey to the discouragement!

And yet... we wonder, sometimes. Human beings are not exactly straightforward in their emotions or the public display thereof. More than ever in



our Facebook and Instagram culture, the gap between the version of ourselves that we show to the world, and the version of ourselves that we live with, endure, and wrestle with day after day, is simply enormous. I find my own faith a hard thing to seize and examine directly. That's one reason I'm so grateful for Luther's ringing insistence that faith is valuable for what it *holds*, not for what it *is*. My faith is nothing much to look *at*. That's why my faith looks *to* the crucified and risen Christ. *That* is something worth looking at—even



though a glass darkly, as in the magic mirror above.

Last month Andrew and I went to a performance of J. S. Bach's "St. John Passion" by the Bach Collegium Japan, conducted by the venerable maestro Maasaki Suzuki. Suzuki himself is a Christian, but there was no mistaking that this event was a performance, not a worship service.

It took place in the gigantic Suntory Hall (only about half-full and everyone's face masked, of course), you had to buy tickets in advance, you were ushered to your seat, you sat silent and observed. But then the disconcerting contrasts began to unfold. The all-Japanese choir belted out the opening lines *Herr! Herr! Unser Herr!* ("Lord! Lord! Our Lord!"). The tenor evangelist narrated Jesus' journey toward death with profound animation. One of the soloists seemed to be moved almost to tears by his hymns addressed to Christ. And there was no mistaking the rapturous attention of the audience (congregation?).

The whole way home we tried to make sense of what we'd just taken part in. Was this just the sophisticated enjoyment of a high-class group of classical music enthusiasts? Or was it, in some strange way, a hidden worship service that was more socially acceptable than one in a church?

—Sarah Hinlicky Wilson

