

Stories from Japan 2011

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Stories from Japan. One story. One sweltering morning several summers ago a Japanese man whom I did not know telephoned the church. He was not a Christian. He had no connection to our church or any other. But he wanted to talk to a pastor, and he wanted to talk to an American, and I'm both, so he contacted our church. He'd seen something in the newspaper a few days before which made terribly real again another summer morning from decades before.

The article he had seen was about the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. This atomic bomb museum had now officially added to the long list of the dead the names of several US Army Air Force flyers who had been downed in Hiroshima a few days before the August 6th 1945 bombing. These Americans were in Japanese military police custody in Hiroshima when the bomb was dropped, and had died with their captors, but Hiroshima had never acknowledged until now that they too were victims.

Their flight had been a reconnaissance mission. They were shot down, but had survived baling out. They came down in the western part of the city. Almost immediately a crowd of women and children gathered. Very quickly the crowd became a frenzied mob, thrusting at the Americans with bamboo spears, screaming, kicking, and throwing rocks. Only the very timely arrival of the Japanese military police fighting its way through the mob to capture the men saved them from being beaten to death on the spot. And this elderly gentleman now phoning me had been one of those rampaging children, ten years old. The American men were hauled away, the boy skipped away with his friends to play. The atomic bomb was dropped a few days later. Like any survivor of the Hiroshima bomb, the boy in greater or lesser measure, lost family, friends, classmates, teachers, neighbors. The work of rebuilding consumed all energies, and all thoughts. In the course of post-war time, the boy became a man, left Hiroshima, and came to our city.

And until just a few days before our conversation, when he opened the newspaper, he had not even remembered that summer morning with the downed airmen. But now he remembered them and was filled with grief, for these young men, and for his own childhood, and for everything that they, and he, had lost. He was filled with remorse for his own savagery toward them; they would die, but he would survive. He learned that

the airmen had been taken to a military police holding station, and in accordance with the usages of the era, almost certainly tortured. This station was a few blocks from what became ground zero, the original ground zero. And there they lost their lives, far from home, and far from friends and family. And this remorse is what he wanted this pastor to hear, that is what he wanted to confess to this American.

I wanted to talk with him about Jesus. But not on the phone. I was thinking, this is so big, we need to meet face to face. I wanted to sit down with him, and listen to him, and offer him my friendship. We couldn't get our schedules to agree right then, so we left it that he'd phone me again. He told me his name, but declined to tell me his phone number. I guess he didn't want a church phoning his house. Sometimes that happens in Japan. A few days later he phoned me again, but I was out, and the person who took the message somehow scrambled it. And he didn't phone back. I prayed and prayed he'd come to church; the next Sunday happened to be Peace Sunday, the first Sunday in August, when many Japanese churches commemorate the atomic bombs, and pray against the madness of war.

All that blisteringly hot week I prayed for him; Psalm 102 kept flickering through my mind when I thought about him so as Sunday neared I prayed it line by line, linking together the man's remorse about the airmen and their fear, and the Lord Jesus, Himself abused, and dead for sinners, and risen for their justification. I readied the sermon, on the passage from the Gospel of Mark where Jesus is beaten and mocked by a battalion of Roman soldiers. That would be 600 Roman soldiers. Jesus knows what that feels like. Jesus on the way to the cross, where every sin of war or peace has been paid for. Anyone can receive His forgiveness, today, now. Sunday morning I was waiting for him with that message on the chance he might show up without phoning. But he didn't come, and I never heard from him again.

This man has been much on my mind in this year of great calamity in Japan. A catastrophe so mammoth that recovery will occupy the thoughts and energies of the survivors' remaining years, as the atomic bombing of Hiroshima did in this man well over sixty years ago. The giant earthquake and tsunami this past March have destroyed much in Japan, but it is not at all clear what will replace it. Japan has great needs, yet the greatest need remains the need for forgiveness of sins, for consciences to be refreshed. Will the Japanese really listen to the gospel now? Will the Japanese dare to entrust their destinies to the Messiah of Israel?

Japanese life goes on, so orderly, and for the most part, so moral. “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” (Ro 3: 21,22) The Messiah of the Jewish people, testified to in the Jewish scriptures, the only lasting hope for Japan. The morning sun has risen, opportunity knocks, sand pours through the hourglass, this is the day of salvation. Now or never. Immeasurably much is at stake.

Your LCJE Japan co-workers send you their warmest greetings. We can't thank you enough for praying for us, and for the wonderful country of Japan. We pray for you too, and for your work, and for your own many struggles and cares. “On the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you” (2 Cor 1:14). Thank you very much!

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