

ELCA Global Missionaries in Japan

# THE WILSON FAMILY



*Palm Sunday at home*

## May/五月 2020

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Well, the world has sure changed since we last wrote to you, hasn't it?

Two months ago I was visiting my parents in the U.S. and heard that Japan had shut down all schools and large public venues. My congregation, Tokyo Lutheran Church, being located at the heart of an already huge city in a very busy district, concluded it had to do the same and said no church for three Sundays.

*Three Sundays without church!* I thought it was unimaginable. I'm sure you did, too, once the news of closures, quarantines, and "social distancing" started to fall on one location after

another around the world. How long have you been without worship in the company of your congregation? For us in Tokyo, it's been nine weeks straight, with no end in sight.

For all that, and despite our closeness to China, Japan seems to be a lot more relaxed than other parts of the world. The Japanese constitution prevents the government from forbidding freedom of movement and freedom of association, so at most it can urge protective measures. As a result, teleworking is on the rise and more people than usual are wearing masks, but otherwise it feels pretty normal. Only a few subtle cues of change here and there, such as:



← No rice!  
(plenty of toilet  
paper, though)

So much room on  
the train! Most of  
the time it's more  
like “hug a  
stranger” →



And not a single bike parked in the bike lot at our train station!



So we, too, are figuring out how to get by when each day is exactly like the one before, with just the three of us as company for each other. All things considered, we're doing pretty well! We enjoyed a couple weeks in March with Andrew's parents visiting us. But then the news came out that Tokyo was declaring a "state of emergency." The US Embassy in Japan advised that Americans had better leave now—flights being down to 10% of their usual numbers—or stay indefinitely. So we sent Andrew's parents home a couple weeks early, relieved that they were still healthy. But in the same moment, we realized that for our part we were accepting the call to "stay indefinitely."

Of all the things we expected to do during missionaries, "staying indefinitely" on account of a pandemic was not one of them! But here we are.

Meanwhile, we've been adapting worship, as you too no doubt have done. I've made audio recordings of my sermons and uploaded them to YouTube, and twice I've done so for our monthly Bible studies, too.

You may recall in the last newsletter how I mentioned that we were trying to learn how to grow as a congregation in prayer. Needless to say, meeting in person has not been an option lately! But I thought that if

we couldn't pray together, we could at least keep learning how to pray on our own. So each week now, I send in the regular congregational e-newsletter a "home prayer service" that loosely follows the outline of a regular service for folks to pray on their own. It includes links to good hymns to sing along with and a place to add their own individual petitions. We're also experimenting with midweek Zoom fellowship meetings. It's all new territory, and it'll be interesting to see what remains part of our practice once things go back to "normal"—whatever the new normal may look like! (My sermons are on [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCv8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8), and you can sign up for the weekly Tokyo Lutheran e-newsletter at <http://jelctokyo.org/english/>.)





There was one particularly bright spot in all of this, though. Despite the lack of lilies, trumpets, and a full congregation to celebrate Easter Sunday, I did get to do my first baptism since arriving in Japan. A young American man started attending church back in January and asked for baptism, so during January and February we worked through the Small Catechism as preparation, planning to have his baptism during our bilingual service



on Easter. Of course, there was no service! But given the circumstances—baptism being the essential sacrament of salvation, no reopening date for the church, the possibility that he or I would get sick—it seemed unwise to delay any longer. So the pastor of the church here on the Lutheran college campus where we live opened the sanctuary to us, and we gathered a small community of the faithful to be the public witnesses to his baptism (all standing very far away from each other and wearing face masks!). A Gregorian chant sings the well-known line, “In the midst of life we are in death.” But a baptism on Easter Sunday during the pandemic

proclaimed to the contrary: “In the midst of death we are in life.” The life of the risen Jesus is not stopped by the cross, by sin, by the devil, and not by the coronavirus, either!

Sadly, there is one thing that the pandemic has definitely knocked out: our first Home Assignment. After much painful deliberation, Global Mission decided to cancel it for this year, possibly to be rescheduled for next year, though it’s still too soon to say exactly what will happen (about this and, well, virtually everything else). We were so excited to come to

each of you wonderful congregations that support us, in many cases to meet you in person for the first time, or to re-meet you after a very long absence! Well, that will still happen, but at a future date. In the meanwhile, we'll continue to share with you these newsletters as we have done, and hopefully we can find other ways to connect as well.

So much has happened so fast, and we've had hardly any time to metabolize it. It's still hard to know if measures have been too mild, too extreme, or just right. It's hard to get a grip on what the virus does, to whom, and why, how to avoid it and how to treat it. Meanwhile, with the ensuing economic catastrophe, huge questions are raised about sheer survival for many people and businesses, not to mention churches themselves. There's no doubt that there's a long hard road ahead.

But there's also no doubt that Jesus Christ lives and reigns: the ultimate story of the redemption of the ultimate lost cause. He is generous to the suffering and gives hope to the despairing. Pandemic conditions can take a lot away, but they can't take away God's address of the gospel to us, or our response of prayer to God. The Spirit prays within us with sighs too deep for words!

**"For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers,  
nor things present nor things to come, nor powers,  
nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation,  
will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."**

*Romans 8:38-39*

—Sarah Hinlicky Wilson

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Stay in with us at [sarah.wilson@elca.org](mailto:sarah.wilson@elca.org) and [andrew.wilson@elca.org](mailto:andrew.wilson@elca.org). To donate, visit <https://community.elca.org/MissionaryGiving> (we're the last on the list—hurray for the W in Wilson!). Checks are payable through your church to "ELCA Global Church Sponsorship" with "Wilson GCS2052" in the memo line.

You can follow Sarah's theology podcast "[Queen of the Sciences](#)" (which includes recent episodes on Luther's writing "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague" and another on "Virtual Communion") and subscribe to her "Theology & a Recipe" e-newsletter at [www.sarahhinlickywilson.com](http://www.sarahhinlickywilson.com).