

# News from Nihon\*

\*Nihon or Nippon is the Japanese way of saying Japan.

May brought new glimpses into Japanese culture, meetings, holidays, and a day of yardwork at a nearby church. My English conversation class seems to be growing and changing. The ages of my students are becoming more diverse and I am trying to adapt and remain a useful resource for them. It's a fun and interesting challenge. The main prayer request I have for the month is for patience and gentleness with myself. How I treat and care for myself remains a lifelong journey.



In front of Aoi Aso Jinja



At the end of the month, the Director for Asia and the Pacific of the ELCA, The Rev. Dr. Y Franklin Ishida came to Kumamoto for a check-in. Last summer, I met him for the first time in-person in Tokyo, but that was as I was still finding my footing in Japan. Not only did we have an individual meeting, but there was a group dinner with all the missionaries connected to the ELCA in Kumamoto, a rare occurrence.

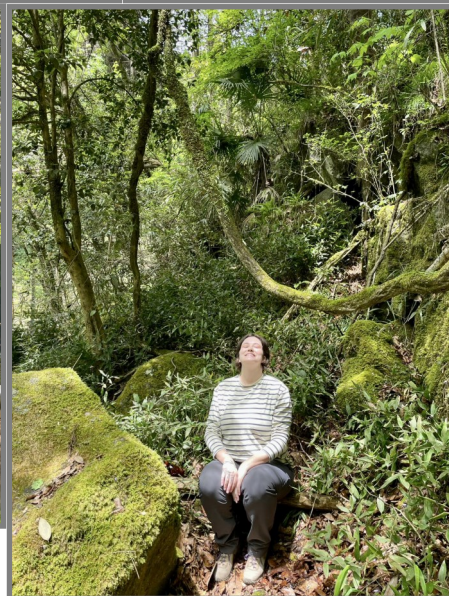
As Covid restrictions continue to lift in Japan, the Japanese tradition of work parties has made a return. This month, I attended the welcome party for the English department at an izakaya (traditional Japanese restaurant) as we welcomed two new full-time Japanese teachers to our ranks. After the initial party wrapped up, a group of us went on to karaoke. This was the second time I have gone to karaoke in Japan, but the first time with coworkers. I tried to think of English songs the group might know and Bohemian Rhapsody by Queen was a hit.

The other work party I went to at the end of the month was a PTA party. The full-time teachers and parents met for dinner at a hotel. There was the same tradition of food and drinking and first toasts and speeches I have come to expect. Everyone, both parents, and teachers, were introduced by category or grade. I didn't realize beforehand that I was supposed to be introduced and missed my category's introduction (full-time teachers not assigned to a specific grade). These things happen when you don't speak Japanese. Unfortunately for me, they felt the need to introduce me, so I got my own individual introduction. When I don't have an assigned job, standing in front of people is hard. It was an interesting event and another side to Japanese school culture.



At the beginning of May, every year in Japan, there are a series of public holidays referred to as Golden Week. They are individual holidays that have been strung together. It would be as if Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, Labor Day, and Thanksgiving all occurred in the same week. I had a fun excursion and a day trip during my Golden Week this year.

One morning, I went with a friend to Nabegataki Falls. While it was somewhat crowded as a popular destination on a public holiday, it was quite fun and relaxing. We had a beautiful and scenic drive through Aso. All of the motorcycles were out enjoying the fabulous weather, too. One of the fun features of the waterfall is you can walk all the way behind it through to the other side. I loved the feeling of the water spraying on me. My friend was understanding and let me find an out of the way spot to pause and soak in the beauty around me. We ended our glorious outing by eating tonkatsu.







The following day, I joined two friends on a day trip to Hitoyoshi. Hitoyoshi experienced major flooding in 2020 and my friends wanted to see how they were doing a few years later. It was a touch rainy, and so for our boat ride down the river, my friends rented us traditional hats, meant to keep off the rain or sun. I enjoyed the boat ride immensely. We were low to the water. The main person steering/paddling as needed was at the back of the boat. There was another person at the front acting as a tour guide and occasionally helping with the steering. My understanding is that when boat rides down the river first began, the course was significantly longer, taking about 3 hours. As the river has changed over time, so has accessibility, and the course has gotten shorter. After the flood, it is even shorter than before. These days, the course is about 45 minutes or so navigating sections of small rapids and more smooth currents. We ate lunch at the boat company's restaurant, where I had grilled cheese and a chocolate pancake for dessert.

After lunch, we went to Aoi Aso Jinja (Shrine), which is a well-known shrine in the area. Shrines would be a part of the Shinto tradition and temples would be a part of the Buddhist tradition, although they do sometimes seem to be together in the same place. We fed the koi fish in the river in front of the shrine. It reminded me of my childhood. The shrine was also flooded, although not significantly damaged. The water rose to a level taller than me, which helped give me a visual perspective to the scope of the flooding. The shrine has been around for roughly 1200 years, as it was first founded in 806. I was delighted to be able to look back at some photos from 45 to 100 years ago that were on display. Five of the buildings are designated as National Treasures by Japan. According to the website, the current group of shrine buildings was constructed during the same period 400 years ago. The fact that a series of shrine pavilions were built in the same period is said to be rare in Japan. It was a thought-provoking place. I ran into a work colleague as I left, reminding me of how small the world can be at times.



The white mark above my head was the height of the flood waters.





We ended the day by spending a few hours at a local onsen (public bathhouse around a hot spring). I love getting to move between hot pools, cold pools, and a sauna. I think the many onsen are one of the pleasurable things about living on Kyushu. It was a lovely day.

On Saturday, another friend and I met amidst pouring rain and checked out a new international shop. I was able to get chocolate covered pretzels (I miss pretzels of all kinds, but particularly regular ones like Rold Gold) and found out they carry Campbell's soups. I've tried to make green bean casserole in the past for Thanksgiving when I lived in Norway and the cream of mushroom soup was the most challenging ingredient to figure out at the time. I don't know how easy it would be to find the rest of the ingredients in Japan, but I filed away that information for later. We also got the chance to try a local Mexican restaurant that had been recommended to me and it was good! The flavors were right and I could order the right level of spice for me. There are definitely still Tex-Mex places I miss, but I was delighted to find a local place where I can get a fix when I am feeling homesick.



And finally, when people ask me what my hobby is I've started to answer "eating." I am always trying to make new social connections over food or simply, taking chances to eat good food. I don't always have pictures, but I do have good memories. Until next time!

