DEVOTIONAL

BEAUTY GIVEN BY GRACE: THE BIBLICAL ART OF

Sadao Watanabe

A CIVA TRAVELING EXHIBITION
The Fine Arts Advisory Team of Second Presbyterian Church, in coordination with CIVA| Christians in the Visual Arts, is delighted to present the traveling exhibition, *Beauty Given by Grace: The Biblical Prints of Sadao Watanabe*, featuring original works of graphic art by Japan’s foremost Christian artist of the 20th century. Born in 1913, Watanabe was baptized as a Christian at age 17 and devoted his life to depicting the stories of the Bible in a visual language understandable to the Japanese. He used a traditional technique for dyeing textiles with hand cut stencils from the Okinawa Islands to make prints on paper. When Watanabe died in 1996, he left behind a visual legacy unique in contemporary sacred art.

*Beauty Given by Grace: The Biblical prints of Sadao Watanabe* brings together 50 stencil prints, calendars and cards on biblical themes from the collections of Sandra Bowden and John A. Kohan. These intricately patterned images in a variety of styles and formats offer a panoramic view of the Bible, beginning with the Garden of Eden in Genesis and concluding with angelic trumpeters at the end of time in Revelation. Watanabe saw himself as a Christian printmaker whose mission was “to stand within the artistic tradition of Japan.” In his visual world, the creatures entering Noah’s Ark correspond to the animal signs of the Asian zodiac. Jesus and his disciples wear kimonos and gather at the Last Supper to eat fish and drink sake.

Watanabe found inspiration in the *mingei* folk art movement that developed in Japan in the mid 1920s to promote traditional handcrafts made from natural materials. Working with his wife, Harue, Watanabe cut all his stencil patterns by hand and printed his images on handmade mulberry paper, coloring them with vegetable and mineral pigments. He created small biblical scenes on untreated sheets of *washi* Japanese paper and large folio-sized prints on *momigami* wrinkled paper, made by crumpling and stretching sheets of mulberry paper to create a textured surface. Examples of both types of prints can be seen in the exhibition. Watanabe’s stencil prints can be found in the permanent collections of the British Museum, New York’s Museum of Modern Art, The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo, and the Vatican Museum of Modern Religious Art.

This devotional book is intended as a meditation tool to aid the viewer in exploring each displayed work in its biblical context. Take time to explore the pieces in detail. It may take several visits to appreciate the depth of inspiration contained in each work. Please leave this booklet in McFarland hall for other individuals who wish to explore Watanabe's prints. If you would like a personal copy of this devotional, please visit the Music & Fine Arts office during business hours.
ABOUT CIVA - SERIOUS ART, SERIOUS FAITH.

Christians in the Visual Arts (a non-profit 501(c)3 organization) exists to cultivate an incarnational presence in culture, equip artists in their vocational calling, and nurture the relationship between the visual arts and the Christian faith.

Founded in 1979, the organization’s longstanding vision is to help artists, collectors, critics, professors, historians, pastors and arts professionals explore the profound relationship between art and faith. With this as a point of beginning, CIVA’s broad range of conferences, exhibits, programs, and publications exists to help the art and faith movement flourish both in the Church and in culture.

CIVA encourages Christians in the visual arts to develop their particular callings to the highest professional level possible; to learn how to deal with specific problems in the field without compromising our faith and our standard of artistic endeavor; to provide opportunities for sharing work and ideas; to foster intelligent understanding, a spirit of trust, and a cooperative relationship between those in the arts, the Church, and culture; and ultimately, to establish a Christian presence within the secular art world.

WHY SHOULD RELIGION AND THE ARTS MATTER?

CIVA’s vision and mission statement make the case for a strong relationship between the church and the arts.

Called to Creative Work

Artists create culture. They have eyes to see, ears to hear, and hands to make. The genius of Christian community is that all who belong are invited to participate, invited to bring their skills and their passions to contribute to the greater good.

As men and women bear God’s image by all kinds of creative expression, CIVA equips those called to the visual arts to flourish in their holy vocation and to pursue it with excellence.

Devoted to the Church

The visual arts help the Church to rehearse and remember the biblical story. The visual arts help congregations worship more deeply. The visual arts help Christian communities build a bridge to the non-believing world. The visual arts deepen times of personal devotion and prayer.

As the Church awakens to its need for art and the artists who make it, CIVA deploys its expertise and resources to help the Church embrace the visual arts and bring work of quality and substance into its centers of worship and learning.

Present in Culture

Culture is that place where we “live and move and have our being,” that place where, each day and in every way, God’s people either magnify the presence of God’s Kingdom or diminish it.

As the world needs the salt, light, and leaven of those who follow Jesus, CIVA cultivates an incarnational presence in contemporary culture that is marked by serious art, learning and practice, intellectual rigor, prophetic voice, serious pursuit of faith, and a spirit of hospitality.

UPCOMING EXHIBIT

The Student’s Eye – February 15 to March 27. This annual exhibit features the works in a variety of media by students in the Broad Ripple High School Magnet School for the Arts.
Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” . . . And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed. (RST)

This simple, almost iconic piece contains just three main characters—Eve, Adam, and the serpent. Around those three revolves the mystery of creation. From Genesis 2, we know that this is “pre-Fall,” that this scene happens before the couple has consumed the forbidden fruit and fallen away from God’s intention. How has Sadao Watanbe portrayed this? Adam and Eve are both naked. In their nakedness—depicted matter-of-factly by Watanbe’s unpretentious print—they remain bare before their Creator and before one another in the blissful world without sin. Creation, as God himself put it throughout Genesis 1, is “good” and ultimately “very good.”

And yet, wound between them is the serpent, “more crafty” (the text says) than any other creature, who is poised—as we who know the story—to lead Adam and Eve down the path of distrusting God, dividing them from each another, and in the process, becoming unable to be blissfully naked and unashamed. Somehow we see that, in the mystery of creation, there is the possibility of evil—of the choice made for self and not for God. And so sin lies “crouching at your door” (Genesis 4:7), or here, wound between every human decision and relationship.

The goodness and simplicity of creation and the complex confusion of sin—it’s all there in this simple print, which Watanabe has carefully and modestly portrayed.

We are confronted with these questions: Will we move toward the goodness of creation or listen to the voices that draw us away from God and one another? How will we practice faith in these 40 days that brings us toward being fully alive in Christ?

Gracious Creator God, thank You for this day. Draw us toward Your gracious Presence and the sheer goodness of creation.

GREG COOTSONA
Eve and The Serpent

GENESIS 3:1-5

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast in the field that the LORD God had made... (NIV)

Right on the heels of the beautiful story of God creating man and woman, and placing them in the idyllic Garden of Eden to take care of it, comes a shake-up of God's created order. And it comes through the “crafty” serpent. This trickster enters the scene and transforms a beautiful situation by shaking up the cosmos and altering it forever. This dialogue initiates a pivotal event for all of humankind. What follows this scene is the first sin of humanity.

The Watanabe image clearly represents Eve as the predominant character of the story. She takes up the most amount of space in the rendition, with her white body standing out strongly against the dark backdrop. The serpent, in its craftiness, appears almost as a part of the vine on which it is slithering. A very subtle head leans forward toward Eve to draw her into conversation.

The serpent asks Eve for some clarification about God’s “law” regarding eating the fruit of the trees in the Garden. Although Eve received the directive second-hand from Adam, she does accurately report that death is the consequence of eating of the fruit of a particular tree in the Garden. The serpent proceeds to contradict what God said: “You will not certainly die...for God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” The serpent corrects God, making God out to be a liar! Eve, at that point, was faced with a dilemma: Was God telling the truth, or was God a liar? She must have asked herself, “Can I trust God?”

This pivotal exchange tells us so much about the root of sin. When we choose sin in our lives, isn’t it often because we don’t trust God with our lives and we consequently take matters into our own hands? Don’t we sometimes think that we know what is best for our lives? If we’re honest, we can all relate to Eve’s dilemma.

Lord, please help me to see where I may not be trusting you in my life and instead taking matters into my own hands.

SHANNON CHRISTOPHER
Cain and Abel

GENESIS 4:8-12

Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” (NIV)

I have to admit to owning a prejudice against this story and as a consequence haven’t spent much time with it. But the remarkable thing about Watanabe’s concise rendition of this story that I have re-entered it with new eyes. I love when art makes this possible.

There is a lot of black here. It’s in the strange sky with oblong clouds. The fat border at the bottom of the picture. The dress both brothers are wearing. Black eyes, a black stick. There’s darkness in me, too. And in you. We all struggle with it.

During Cain’s famous struggle God made it clear to him that he needed to deal with his problem. “Sin is crouching at your door,” God warned, “it desires to have you, but you must master it.” We don’t have to pretend that this isn’t our problem as well, right? So, how to master the sin that is anger?

“Don’t sin by letting anger gain control over you. Think about it overnight - search your heart! - and remain silent. Offer proper sacrifices and trust in the Lord...” If we do that, Psalm 4 tells us that the Lord will lift up the light of his countenance upon us and he’ll put gladness in our hearts. I’m up for that! But to be honest, this takes work, doesn’t it? My confession is that it has taken years for me to simply learn to remain quiet when provoked because I’m prone to defending myself. So often I need the sort of help found in this psalm if I’m to “offer proper sacrifices.” But how to accomplish this? On my own, I have no idea but I find further help in Hebrews: “Let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise - the fruit of lips that confess his name.” (13:15). Jesus, Son of God, be my strength!

Look at the print with me again. Abel is somersaulting into death and the field where the brothers walked is spotted now with blood. Think about what might have happened had Cain listened to the Lord’s warning, trusted him, and remained silent. He might have felt the light of the Lord’s countenance. What then? The chip on his shoulder might have become gladness of heart. He might have praised God instead of belligerantly spewing, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” No love there. No freedom to receive the Lord’s gladness.

Lord, you know us. When provoked, my struggle is to be quiet and to offer proper sacrifices. Help me to remain silent and trust you! Let it be so. Amen.

LAUREN MESA
(Noah) waited seven more days and again sent out the dove from the ark. (NIV)

Calm, soothing aquatic blue is the dominant color in this print, and a color the Japanese are so intimate with from their island world. The broad brush strokes and the curvy roof line mimic the gentle waves below the boat. Sadao’s audience would have immediately recognized the familiar animals of the Asian zodiac; ox, horse, dog, rooster and rabbit; their national bird, the pheasant, and several other common birds. The ark, buoy-like, rests on the water. The rains have stopped, and now the waiting begins.

Waiting. This is the difficult part.

When the ocean is all swells and winds, when you are in survival mode and your stress hormones sustain you beyond what you can imagine, that is a certain kind of struggle. But it is also hard when the storm has subsided but the waters have not, when you are adrift, directionless, and not knowing when nor where you are going to land. The buoy now looks like a cage — a Japanese cricket cage, to be exact. As the waiting drags on we look less like the content pheasant and more like the shocked owl; its nocturnal lifestyle completely disrupted. Hasn’t this gone on long enough? When will my life return to normal? A little jealously sets in for us, like the cramped turtle eying the sea otter. How come he doesn’t have to be locked up in this ark? It’s not fair.

This lifeboat that contained the continuation of creation and humanity probably felt, at times, like a cage, even as it transported them literally to a new world, a new life. This seems to be a favorite tool of our God, to make the cage the change agent. Think the Israelites in the desert, the captivity of Daniel, Joseph in jail, Jesus in the tomb. Think cocoon, and butterfly.

What in my life feels like a cage? A difficult marriage, distant children, addiction, an unfulfilling job, an aging body?

Lord, I give that cage to you, to slowly rock me to a new place that I would not have landed on my own. Lord, I trust you while I wait.

TINA HOOVER
And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.” (ESV)

The artist is drawn to this subject, as he created quite a few Noah’s Ark prints. This vivid work presents like a rich mosaic: deep, layered images of the diversity of animal life nurtured and sustained in the womb of the ark.

Noah is pictured reaching up for the olive branch, a long-awaited symbol of God’s faithfulness. He has climbed to the top of the ark, scanning the skies. Waiting. This isn’t the first time he’s scanned the skies - a raven and this same dove have already returned twice with no evidence of his trial coming to an end. In fact, I imagine that as soon as the rain stopped, Noah spent hours looking out over the endless water, watching for the fulfilment of God’s promise… for over 150 long days.

What did Noah feel as he looked out over the prow of his 120-year obedience, seeing nothing but desolation? Scripture speaks often of God communicating with Noah before the flood, but says nothing about God speaking to Noah in those long, cold, wet days and nights. While the passage tells us that “God remembered Noah and all that were with him,” He was disturbingly quiet as Noah and his family endured the devastation.

Yet Noah trusted God in his waiting. Here we see the first reward: surrounded by water, Noah reaches up… and receives his future from the beak of a dove. And then, in the sky, God gives this renewed world a glorious gift: its very first rainbow. It speaks the loveliest of promises: “You are not forgotten.”

What is the “waiting” in your life? For emotional or physical healing? For loved ones to know the God who keeps His promises? For God’s touch in circumstances beyond your control?

Today, as you gaze out over the waters of your waiting, remember this essence of who God is: He remembers His covenant. He remembers you.

JO ANNE CRIPE
The Sacrifice of Isaac

GENESIS 22:11-13

But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me. And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns.” (NRS)

What was Abraham thinking? Did he think God wanted him to sacrifice his only son? Since the cultures around him believed that the gods demanded the best that people could give, even the sacrifice of their children, could the true God of heaven and earth demand anything less from him?

Has Abraham suffered some form of spiritual relapse? In Genesis 22:1, the “God” who calls him to sacrifice his son is Elohim — “the divinity” — the ancient, remote, high god of earlier belief. In Genesis 22:11, the God who calls a halt to the sacrifice is Yahweh — the close, personal God who called Abraham to follow him. What is going on here? Does Abraham fear that God is one of those divinities who must be appeased by child sacrifice? It’s interesting to see that Watanabe paints Abraham’s clothing the same color as the cultural framework in which he stands. Evidently, Abraham’s faith does not yet stand in contrast to the bankrupt forms of spirituality that surround him.

In Watanabe’s painting, Abraham seems curiously blind. He does not notice the faithful, patterns of creation marching along behind him. Also, he seems oblivious to the ram that is clawing at him, practically begging to be sacrificed in Isaac’s place! Abraham has stated his hope that God will provide (22:8) but seems curiously blind to God’s actual provision.

Abraham will discover that the true God is not like the gods who demanded child sacrifice. In Lent, may we have eyes to see the true lamb... God’s own Son, offered up for us all.

Lord, in times of anxiety, open our eyes to your gracious provision. Amen.

ALLEN MCCALLUM
And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” (NRSV)

Whenever we walk into a story about Jacob and the characters that make up his lineage there is always intrigue. This story is no different. Jacob before this scene had been coaxed to lie to his father by his mother and then betray his brother. His brother, Esau, having his blessing stolen, is not a happy guy. Jacob after receiving advice—again from his mother—chooses to leave town and start again safe from the impending revenge of his brother.

So now we are in a dream. I love these dream sequences in the Bible. They make my otherwise wacky dreams seem ordinary. Here we have a ladder to heaven, a night (albeit fairly light version of night) sky, stars in motion and then a full house of characters. I'll admit at my initial confusion. I think I can assert, with some authority, that the four horizontal figures with their feet on the ladder are angels. I love the fact that Watanabe chose often to leave out wings on his angels. This makes them all the more ordinary and our-worldly while simultaneously defying our laws (where is gravity here?). The angels are not coming at him, but they are gesturing towards him in a sign of blessing.

In the passage, God speaks a blessing of promise. “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; I will give you the land; know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.” This is good news to our struggling dreamer.

Jacob's hands (he's the one at the bottom) reach carefully out to heaven's angels who reach down. Heaven touches earth in these complementary actions. God's voice is heard and God's presence is known.

What similar scene does God have you in? Is heaven, God's voice, God's angel reaching out to you? Is there a step or a gesture you need to make to move forward into his light, into his promise?

LAURA COOTSONA
Moses Abandoned

EXODUS 2:3-4

When she could hide him no longer, she took for him a basket made of bulrushes and daubed it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child in it and placed it among the reeds by the river bank. And his sister stood at a distance to know what would be done to him. (NIV)

It helps me to know that the basket, coated with bitumen and pitch, was also made with water-repellent papyrus leaves. This meant that Moses was as safe as he could be in this situation. But if only Amram and Jochebed could have known how it would all turn out! If only abandoning Moses to the river insured a safe future! They had no guarantee it would end well, did they? Not one single guarantee but God alone.

Have you ever felt that way? Ever found yourself sending your beloved out to the wilds of the unknown? I have. Uncharted territory. The currents of life. Danger. Fear. I'm a mother, so, yes, I understand how Jochebed felt. And it isn't a stretch to believe that when she gave her son over to the unknown it was an even greater act of faith than keeping him in hiding. No doubt she came to the end of herself when she said: “If I try to keep him I will lose him.” Was it there that she discovered this most fundamental law of the spiritual life? We know the end of the story, but Jochebed didn’t. She had no choice but to live on a strict diet of hope, and the only way to do so was by faith. That sounds, well, spiritual, doesn’t it? Darn right. Easily said; not so easy to live.

This story isn’t only about a mother trusting her child to his future, to his God, as monumental as that is. It’s also about a sister. Watanabe puts her in the reeds, and such reeds they are! No swaying reeds, these. They’re spikey. A curtain to hide her but also a fearsome place. Brave Miriam. I’ve always admired her, and as an oldest child, one of seven, I sympathize with her as well. “And his sister stood at a distance to know what would be done to him.” What a responsibility! In this print she stands with arms crossed, looking prayerful as her baby brother floats away from her. As a sister who has also stood on the banks watching a brother I love deeply float off into dangerous waters, I relate to these actions and read them with alacrity.

Miriam was vigilant and wise. And quick-witted, too— soon she will come up with a grand plan, and take part in one of the Bible’s most memorable stories. Years later, she will deal with jealousy of this brother, and feel the sting of God’s discipline. But for now, she is a daughter and a sister in the most complete sense as she protects her mother, and also her brother. Brave Miriam.

Think of this story as a prompting to trust God with your beloved...remembering that He loves him/her/them more than you ever can and that He is with you. He is with you! And with them. Loving and holding all of you, even now...

LAUREN MESA
Egyptians Drowning in the Red Sea

EXODUS 14:26-29

*But the people of Israel walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.* (ESV)

Watanabe wanted his works to be displayed in public places or in homes, places where people gathered. This mirrored Jesus’ ministry where he went “to” people and often ate meals in people’s homes. Wouldn’t Watanabe’s work on the Egyptians Drowning in the Red Sea be a fantastic piece to have hanging in your home as a reminder of the Lord’s graciousness, provision, power, and presence?

I love the grand contrasts in the Bible. “But God” is one of those and it is used 43 times. It is used when the fat lady is about to sing, when it looks like it’s all over, when nothing humanly possible can change the outcome. But God moves. The Israelites faced certain annihilation at the hands of their oppressor, Egypt and Pharaoh; they were trapped with nowhere to go, their backs up against the wall. Have you ever felt like that? Where you were up against it? Where you didn’t know how you were going to pay your mortgage?

The Israelites were there “But God” told Moses to stretch out his hands and they walked on dry ground through the sea.

Wait. Stretch out your hands? What do you think Moses thought when God told him to do that? Do you trust God enough to stretch out your hands in that moment? Do you trust God enough in the midst of health issues? Do you trust God enough to make life altering decisions? Do you trust God enough with your kids, money, time, and gifts?

Trust is a word that is used many times in the Bible and it is a relational word at its core. Do we trust that God is good and that He is for us?
“I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. “ ‘Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.’ So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel.” (NIV)

How much need there is in the world today! One can hardly drive down the street without noticing the needs of the world: lonely teenagers, sign-holding homeless people, busy college students, harried mothers, distracted business people—all looking for their needs to be met, some more obvious than others. We, like Moses, have been commissioned to care for the needy (notice the downcast sheep in Watanabe’s print). “Feed my lambs,” Jesus says. “Take care of my sheep… Feed my sheep.” (Jn.21) But how?

The needs of the world are so great and we are just ordinary people. How can we possibly provide what the “sheep” need?

What is in Moses’ hand? Not his right, but his left. Is that a bowl of water? It is. Where did he get it? From the Lord. How often we forget that we, like Moses, have encountered “I AM” in our deserts, heard the Lord on mountains, seen the Deliverer in the seas, been clouded by his presence by day and guided by his fire in our dark nights, been fed his manna and quail when we were starving, and drank deeply of his love when we were thirsty. We quickly forget the words, “I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb.” God stands before us giving us all we need, an endless flow of water from which we give to a needy, “sheepish” world!

We give from the abundance of the Lord. If we would only hold out our cup in obedience and allow God to fill us once again.

*God, fill me that I may give from your abundant grace, patience, joy, healing, and love.*
First Gifts of the Harvest

DEUTERONOMY 26:1-2

When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance and have taken possession of it and live in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there. (ESV)

As I write this, harvest season is ending in Chico. Farmers rest after their labors, tractors are stopped, dust is settling. The Israelites were very familiar with harvest. According to Jewish tradition, first fruit offerings were made of seven species native to the land: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates. I learn that some of each sort were to be put in the same basket, with leaves between them, and presented to God in the place which he should choose. This offering from the bounty provided by God through the gift of the land was associated with the pilgrimage festival known as Shavuot, or Weeks, held seven weeks after Passover.

In Butte country, our land is rich, bountiful, and varied. Surrounding us are vast rice fields, kiwi, almond and walnut orchards, orange and mandarin trees. My husband and I were initially attracted to this land as college kids at Chico State. My great aunt and uncle, native Chicoans, often filled our arms with bags of prunes, oranges and nuts after serving us a home-cooked meal. After graduation we lived in southern California for ten years but ended up coming back to this land. And though we are not farmers, we have had the opportunity to give baskets of oranges, plums, tomatoes and zucchini to friends and neighbors. Fish are plentiful in both the Sacramento and Feather Rivers and further north on the Trinity and the Smith. When my avid fly fisherman comes home with salmon we share it with others. This giving of our bounty has always made me feel...grateful. Yes, that’s the word! Giving makes me feel grateful, just as receiving does.

That’s the closest I can get to this story in Deuteronomy, which encourages me to be thankful, and to offer what I’ve been uniquely given by God for the prospering of my neighbors and my community. If we study the particular produce in this print by Watanabe we can see that he has done that very thing himself. Those might be carrots at the top, then something leafy, lots of corn, and maybe onions and two large squash. Enterprising birds perch nearby, eager for droppings, next to what might be a big bowl of rice. Watanabe embraced the Japanese folk art movement, Mingei, which has as its mission the desire to recover beauty in common things. Do you recognize gratitude in the two figures on either side of this array of food? One closes her eyes as if in prayer, the other looks up to heaven toward the giver of these good gifts.

As you reflect on this passage in contemporary terms ask yourself what some examples might be in your life of “first fruits” that you can offer to God, your families, and the community. We do this out of grateful recognition that everything promoting life, health and peace has been given to us by God...
The Girls and the Lot of Quails

NUMBERS 11:31-32

Then a wind from the Lord sprang up, and it brought quail from the sea and let them fall beside the camp, about a day's journey on this side and a day's journey on the other side, around the camp, and about two cubits above the ground. And the people rose all that day and all night and all the next day, and gathered the quail. Those who gathered least gathered ten homers. And they spread them out for themselves around the camp. (ESV)

Here's a fun fact: quail make a migration over the Sinai wilderness every year and Arabs living near this region use nets to catch between one and two million quail during their autumn migration. That's a lot of quail! In our story, the Lord sent a wind to the people because of their hunger and distress. The quail were low to the ground and in this way the Israelites could easily take as many as they wished, while flying within the reach of their hands or their clubs.

If I were to study this lovely print but read only the accompanying section of scripture without knowing its precise meaning in the Book of Numbers, I'd miss out. I'd believe wrongly that this act was a portrayal of God's kindness in feeding his people. Here's the history behind this gesture: the Israelites had complained against the Lord and he was more than displeased. He had already shown them extraordinary kindness but it was lost on an ungrateful and rebellious people, and as a consequence he told them they'd get meat, alright. In fact, they'd get so much it would fill them for a month and would become loathsome to them. Why such a promise? “Because you have despised the Lord who is among you, and have wept before him, saying, “Why did we ever come out of Egypt?” Even Moses was sick of them, deploring his lot in being obliged to hear and bear with their grumbling. They had denied and doubted the goodness of God’s deliverance, so while this may seem like a strict judgment, in the end it was a help to Israel because it taught them to not be ruled by their craving.

Just one kernel of truth in this story is that it's not possible to store up the nourishment we really need. In fact, if we are constantly in the process of rediscovering the many ways He already feeds us we won't be ruled by our physical or emotional appetites. Right?

But we need more, we say. Watanabe would know this first-hand, having lived through the postwar years in Japan when severe food shortages caused havoc. Malnutrition and disease, for starters. Even rice was in short supply. So, one wonders what the artist's intent was with this print. This is a hard story; it requires that we ask ourselves hard questions. That Watanabe chose to exclusively portray the Bible with his art shows that he did exactly this. In a country where just under two percent of the population profess Christianity, Watanabe went against the grain. He loved Jesus and followed unwaveringly after the truth he encountered in the Bible, disinterested in easy art to appease the masses. He could have grumbled at his lot in suffering social ostracism because of his faith but this artist was not ruled by his appetite. He knew where true nourishment came from.

Take a few minutes to put aside your immediate needs and try to recall the many times God has already delivered and fed you. Then, offer your request here before this picture that serves as a reminder that our best recourse is not to grumble but to trust our Lord.

LAUREN MESA
When Moses sent them to explore Canaan, he said, “Go up through the Negev and on into the hill country. See what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. What kind of land do they live in? Is it good or bad? What kind of towns do they live in? Are they unwalled or fortified? How is the soil? Is it fertile or poor? Are there trees in it or not? Do your best to bring back some of the fruit of the land.”

(It was the season for the first ripe grapes.) (NIV)

For all of human history, the word “harvest” has meant the fruit of one’s labors, abundance, and reward. Here we see farmers bent beneath the weight of their crop, but the picture is festive, the colors bright and vibrant, the tone light and joyful. As the wife of a walnut farmer, I know the relief and satisfaction of harvest, the fulfilment of hard work well done.

There is a “harvest” in the Christian life, too.

We are saved by Grace (Ephesians 2:8-9), and are adopted sons and daughters of the King from the moment we say “Yes!” to God’s free offer of salvation and eternal life. So what does God want from me here, as I walk this life?

Our God loves us so much that He sacrificed his Son to bring us into relationship with Him. We are “positionally holy” - pure and holy in His sight. We didn’t and couldn’t do anything to earn that holiness. What Grace!

He also loves us so much that He does not want to leave us there, unformed in our walk with Him. He wants to grow us so that we are also “manifestly holy” ~ becoming more and more conformed to the likeness of Jesus Christ. It means we get to participate in our transformation. We get to choose Him daily, immerse ourselves in His Word, experience Him working through us in the lives of others, see Him change us from the inside-out...

That’s a deep, lifelong Grace.

And someday, when I am gathered into His arms as His beloved, accepted child, I pray I hear Him whisper, “well done, my faithful one.” Just as a farmer revels in the produce of his hard work, I long to celebrate life’s “Harvest” with my Lord.

Thank you, Father, for the way you love me. Thank You for accepting me, adopting me as your child, making me Your own. Help me respond to Your grace with open arms, allowing You to work in and through me. I want to be transformed into Your likeness. I want my life to be characterized by the fruits of Your Spirit’s work in me.

By Your grace, may it be so.

JO ANNE CRYPE
The Story of Ruth

RUTH 1:22; 2:10

1:22 So Naomi returned from Moab, accompanied by her daughter-in-law Ruth, the young Moabite woman. They arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. (NIV)

2:10 Ruth fell at his feet and thanked him warmly. “Why are you being so kind to me?” she asked. “I am only a foreigner.” “Yes, I know,” Boaz replied. “But I also know about the love and kindness you have shown your mother-in-law since the death of your husband. I have heard how you left your father and mother and your own land to live here among complete strangers. May the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge, reward you fully.” (NIV)

Something profound happens in humans when we take our focus off circumstances and turn our eyes upward towards others and to God who can see the bigger picture. Wantanabe even leads us to do this with “The Book of Ruth” by starting the story at the bottom of the print. The rocky grave with its three markers separates the grieving widows from the deceased men. Ruth and Naomi, their dwelling empty of food or providers, cling together in prayer. Like the three birds hiding amongst the sheaves, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are in the middle of their story, guiding and directing, and soon Ruth finds herself working “in a field belonging to Boaz.” Raising our eyes up to the top half we see their dwelling now full of food. Boaz draws near and the city elders await to bless this new marriage. We can see the entire story from despair to happily ever after and we breathe a collective sigh of relief that everything turned out all right.

But Ruth did not get to see the whole picture. In spite of (or perhaps because of) despair and broken dreams, Ruth made a decision to follow this God Yahweh instead of her cultural gods. She had to trust God for each step of her journey, from Moab to Israel to the field to the threshing floor. Each step was taken with faith, without knowing the end of the story.

Surely Ruth’s life resonated with Watanabe. He too was counter-culture, embracing Christianity in a culture where less than 2% are Christians. He lost his father, lived in poverty, suffered from tuberculosis, and had his home destroyed by war. During his days of working as a dye artist he probably never dreamed of God’s plan for his life – to bring Jesus to the Japanese culture in an entirely new way.

Lord, help me to lift my eyes towards you. Give me the faith to know you are at work in my life. I reject my culture’s idols of money and independence and choose to trust you every step of my journey.

TINA HOOVER
Elijah Ascending

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?”

“Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,” Elisha replied.

“You have asked a difficult thing,” Elijah said, “yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise, it will not.”

As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. 12 Elisha saw this and cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two.

Elisha then picked up Elijah’s cloak that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. (NIV)

Just as Moses passed the mantle of leadership on to Joshua (Num. 27:12-23), now Elisha is the chosen successor to the great prophet Elijah. But this isn’t a simple succession, a typical passing of a torch to a qualified candidate: it is a specific call from God—an ordination. As Joshua was specifically called by God to lead, now Elisha was being called by God to prophesy through the ascension of Elijah and the passing of his garment (v.13). If Elijah didn’t ascend, Elisha wouldn’t be able to fulfill his calling; but in fact Elijah did ascend and Elisha did fulfill his call. Elijah’s ascension in the chariot of fire was a necessary event if the prophetic tradition was to continue in God’s story in Israel.

Jesus told his disciples, “Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father,” (Jn. 14:12, emphasis mine). Like Elijah, Jesus had to go away so his followers could receive the power of the Holy Spirit to continue his earthly ministry:

- To proclaim good news to the poor,  
- proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
- and recovery of sight for the blind,  
- to set the oppressed free,  
- to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (Luke 4:18)

If we call ourselves Christ-followers, we can be assured that we have received his Holy Spirit! God has empowered us to fulfill his call to us. Some are called to preach, others to teach, some to serve, some to pray, others to lead, yet others to show compassion. Some are artists, mathematicians, businessmen and women, stay home parents, doctors, lawyers…you get the point. The power of the ascended Christ and God’s descended Holy Spirit is in you to carry out your “ordination,” to fulfill your specific calling, just like Elisha, just like the first disciples.

Will you, like Elijah, reach down and pick up the garment of your master? Will you say “yes” to the ordination that God has for you today?

JIM COONS
Jonah

JONAH 1:17

“But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.” (NRS)

What do you think? Which person in this painting is the prophet Jonah? A closer look suggests that it must be the person in the center. The ship’s crew had cast lots to determine whose guilt had brought this storm upon them. Here the captain of the ship presents the lot to Jonah, who admits his guilt, gestures toward the sea, and says, “Throw me in.”

These people are all in the same boat, but who is closest to God? Jonah was supposed to be a prophet of God, but he has done everything he could to run away from God’s call. God had called him to go to Nineveh and preach repentance to the very people who had invented war by atrocity. Jonah had refused his mission, not because he was afraid, but because he knew it would succeed. If he preached, the people of Nineveh would repent, and God would have mercy on them. Jonah wanted no part of this, so he hopped a ship heading west to get as far away from God as possible.

The crew members were pagan polytheists. But this unpleasant contact with a recalcitrant prophet was all it took to turn their hearts to God! They demonstrated God-like qualities of mercy in their heroic efforts to spare Jonah.

The story finally ended well. The great fish swallowed Jonah and regurgitated him on the shores of mission territory. It’s hard to see who was most relieved...Jonah or the fish who had finally rid himself of an indigestible prophet. Jonah preached and Nineveh repented!

Matthew’s Gospel reminds us that we have received “the sign of Jonah.” Jesus was buried in “the heart of the earth” for three days (Matthew 12), only to rise and announce that “repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations” (Luke 24).

Lord, forgive us for being offended when you love people who don’t deserve it. Amen.

ALLEN MCCALLUM
The Annunciation

LUKE 1:26-31

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.”

Another visitation scene. If you travel the halls of a medieval museum or any biblical art gallery, you will see many “annunciations.” Viewing multiple versions of this scene is like reading different biblical translations of an old familiar passage. The differences from one to the next are often subtle and other times stark. But, if you as the reader or viewer stand still and listen to this new translation, you will pick up a different nuance, angle, viewpoint than from the proceeding version.

This is true with this Watanabe rendition. Watanabe places our two subjects in a flowery happy colored backdrop. The eye is drawn, at least mine, first to Mary, the smaller of the two figures on the right. She is pensive, demure (see the tilt of her head), clearly beautiful with her long locks of hair. And she is receptive, with one hand reaching towards the messenger. And then we are drawn to her torso. Is this Watanabe’s depiction of a pregnant belly? A belly filled with life? Or something more abstract? It certainly doesn’t look like an ordinary torso as compared with his other figures. Something special is happening here.

The messenger might be considered winged or cloaked, but certainly this angel is authoritative with the still gaze, the pointing finger, the outreached hand of blessing. This one is here on business, serious business of the coming Messiah.

So as you meditate on yet another annunciation, what new thing do you see? And what do you see, that is consistent between this one and the last one you viewed?

As you wait upon Jesus, what do you learn from Mary? Where do you need to ponder or pray? What is Jesus asking of you through his angels?
An Angel and Shepherds

LUKE 1:26-31

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” (ESV)

I searched this print for a long time, waiting to be inspired to write. Nothing. Not until I thought of the word fear being attributed to the shepherds did anything stir in me. The first words the angel used were: Fear not! But still, I struggled with Watanabe’s shepherds and angel. They seemed so wooden. So stiff.

Then I did some research about the actual word “fear” in the Japanese culture. As it turns out, they have 20 separate characters, or expressions, for this word. That’s a lot. There’s everything from “fear, overawed” to “sincere, fear, sudden, blinking,” to “uneasiness, fear, anxiety, concern.” Here’s the one I chose for the shepherds in Luke: “fear, majestic, graciously, be apprehensive.” I can picture that, can’t you? Angels have lit up the sky, and one has actually come so close they can touch it – that would account for a majestic fear. And this glorious news might have turned their fear to something gracious, though still apprehensive. After all, these shepherds have had a spotlight on them, and they aren’t used to attention. Among Jews of that time, shepherds were held in very low esteem. The Talmud instructed that no help be given to heathens or to shepherds. Shepherds were despised because they were unable to attend temple services and to keep the rituals and ceremonial laws as their flocks kept them from practicing their religion. In short, they were filthy and the bottom line was that filth kept folks out of the temple and out of sight. Add to that, they were poor, lower-class, illiterate, and despised. Fascinating then, that God chose shepherds to be the first ones to hear the good news of the birth of Jesus.

He came to the poor and the outcast. He, who could have been born in a palace, chose a stable. He, who could have had his birth announced to royalty, chose lowly shepherds instead. When I look at Watanabe’s shepherds now their bodies actually look like the Japanese symbols for fear, the characters I studied: arms bent akimbo, feet at odd angles. They personify fear majestic, and fear, overawed too. All of a sudden I am faced with the thought of how I accept this news as one already embraced and loved unconditionally. What is my posture? Forgive me, Lord, while I get down on my knees.

Does the good news the angels announced to the shepherds fill you with awe or has it become old news, something reserved for the Christmas story to be read as rote in December? Take a minute to imagine an angel speaking to you...what would it say? How might your heart be stirred?

LAUREN MESA
Nativity

LUKE 2:16-19

“...Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.” (NIV)

One night, the shepherds were out attending to their flocks and an unexpected event happened which transformed their lives forever. That this little, innocent baby born in a manger could have such an effect upon the world is simply miraculous. Amen!

Watanabe’s image of the visiting shepherds employs multiple arcs and curvatures that cause an encircling of the Holy Family in the center of the piece. Like an ocular that focuses in on something important and captures a moment of time, this image captures a Holy Moment. It is a moment Mary recognized as so special and holy, that she treasured it and tucked it away into her permanent mother’s heart. Mothers know experientially what this line of Scripture means. There are so many moments during motherhood when you tuck a memory away into your heart, where it will never be lost. We mothers have a special gift for treasuring “mothering moments” away in our hearts.

When it comes to Jesus, this ability to treasure things in our hearts knows no gender or situational limits. We all have moments when we experience Jesus in our lives and treasure them in our hearts. We ponder them long after they have passed. We are so grateful for those “God moments” we have. We use them to ground us “when the going gets tough” so that we can remember that Jesus is always with us, always hears us, and always wants the best for us.

In the way that the shepherds experienced an unexpected event during their daily routine, how have we experienced some unexpected event from Jesus in our lives? It could be something that happened within the last week or over the scope of our lives that we will treasure in our hearts forever. Let us ponder the holy, beautiful, miraculous ways we have experienced Jesus in our lives. If we search, we will find that our hearts are filled with these treasures, just as Mary also experienced.

Jesus, we thank you for the encounters we have with you in our lives. We will treasure them in our hearts forever.

SHANNON CHRISTOPHER
"And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh." (NIV)

Picture it. Mary and Joseph - still pondering the import of the astonishing night of Jesus' birth - are living quietly with their tiny son. Then come unexpected visitors. Perhaps villagers ran ahead of the strangers, whispering excitedly: “Strange men are coming! They are wealthy and important! Why do they come here to you?”

And as Mary and Joseph receive them, these impressive visitors bow down before their baby. They bring gifts beyond price.

Mary’s expression looks beyond this startling encounter. Moments like this remind her that something much bigger than she is prepared for lies ahead. The print emphasizes her outward gaze as she protectively holds her quiet, serious child. For a brief season, these two young parents had enjoyed the calm joys of intimate family life. But their future has followed them here, and it is clear that things are about to change.

We know the drama that comes after this singular moment. But Mary only knows what the angels have told her: she has given birth to the Savior of the world. The honor and the weight of this reality leave her pensive and still.

Remember Mary’s responses throughout her astonishing journey as the mother of the Messiah: “‘I am the Lord’s servant,’ Mary answered. ‘May your word to me be fulfilled.’” (Luke 1:38) “And Mary said: ‘My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.’” (Luke 1:46,47) “Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.” (Luke 2:19) “Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother...” (John 19:25)

Lord, I want to be like Mary. I want to take what comes from Your hand with openness and receptivity. I want to rejoice in my Savior, to glory in Your greatness. I want to ponder what You reveal to me. And I want to be Your faithful follower - regardless of circumstances. By Your strength, may it be so.
Flight to Egypt

MATTHEW 2:13-15

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.” (NRSV)

Ever since I was a girl I have searched for his figure in nativity sets. He is usually off to the side, his bowed head a sign of hopeful vigilance. Joseph rarely gets much credit, but if he were asked about that I don’t think it would bother him. He’s concerned with other things. Like generosity. And obedience. This simple man, a carpenter who loved Mary to distraction, had God-dreams. Having already believed and acted upon the first dream the Angel of the Lord gave him, he had no reason to doubt the second. His swift reaction is part of why I love the man. He got up, took the child and his mother by night, and left for Egypt. No ambiguity. No tossing and turning. He got up and obeyed.

Artists are often very intentional about including symbolism in their work, but sometimes they aren’t even aware they have done so. When one creates in an intuitive manner the result is often discovery, surprise – even for the artist! I wonder if that was what happened here. Because Mary and Joseph’s fingers and toes mimic the white designs in the mounds of earth I’m allowed a leap of thought: if the earth was made of praying hands then the road and the journey were blessed. Even though this flight was directed by God, what a frightening night it must have been. Under threat of death they fled! But the night was not completely void because even the flowering plants had eyes. In a world that was terrible with darkness surely God was showing them the way. Sustenance and shelter would soon be theirs.

The journey itself is symbolic, fulfilling what the Lord had spoken by the prophet Hosea. God’s children in the form of Israel went down into Egypt, just as Jesus, God’s one and only Son, did on this memorable night. Here Matthew speaks with knowledge only the Holy Spirit could have given him. Israel was later led out of Egypt by Moses. And while we don’t know how long Jesus and his parents were in Egypt, we do know they left. Just like Israel. “Out of Egypt I called my Son.”

Watanabe is a master of pattern. It’s everywhere. It makes me want to play a game my children and I used to enjoy: I spy with my little eye: lines in fingers, toes, dress, hair, Joseph’s kimono and the blanket Mary sits upon. Triangles, a triad harkening to the Holy Spirit: in the donkey’s mane, Mary’s head covering, the tiny shapes inside night-blooming flowers, bushes lining the road like small tents, even noses. A fantastic journey among pinwheel flowers. Patterns. Makes me wonder if Watanabe used them to remind us of the fulfillment of prophecy. Hosea - Matthew. Israel - Jesus. Patterns. The wonderful donkey with his large, all-seeing eye, head bowed in adoration, might know.

Some people discard parts of this miraculous story. Let’s not do that. Instead, ask yourself if there are “God-patterns” in your life. What has led you to today? What path will you take from here?

LAUREN MESA
After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. (RST)

Unlike us in the United States, both contemporary Japanese and 1st century Jewish culture had immense respect for elders. And, in a largely preliterate era (by which I simply mean there weren’t many books), you learned by listening to those older than you.

This fact gives us context for the scene and the reason for its surprise. In this scene, the smaller figure of Jesus is “listening to” and “asking questions” of those who knew more. (Yes, they knew more—despite Jesus’s being fully God, we know from this Gospel, that he grew in stature.) Here they are, with the Torah scrolls —these first five biblical books of “law,” or better, “instruction”—with one scroll unveiled at the top of the art piece as a backdrop behind Jesus’s head. They are all together conversing, including the adolescent Jesus, who remains in the center of the piece. Or might they even be arguing a bit? I was once told that, in certain parts of New York City, where there’s a host of Jewish scholars, if anyone would see you with a Hebrew Bible, they’d say, “Let’s argue Torah.” Let’s argue—let’s work hard at this text, let’s put forward our questions and concerns.

One of the most important elements in these prints is the moment in the encounter. Watanabe imagines us at a place of amazement by those older (and in the picture, bigger) than Jesus; these are listening to him astounded by his “understanding and answers.” And this is the surprise. Jesus demonstrates amazing command of God’s intention in Torah. “Do not think that I have come to abolish Torah or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17). At the right time, when he grew to adulthood, he would come to reveal this fulfillment through his life, death, and resurrection. But for now, he learns, argues, and astonishes.

Our prayer in light of this passage and image might be this: Lord, make me humble enough to learn from others. Help me to be a diligent student of Scripture and the story You tell us through it. Most of all let me simply learn from You.

GREG COOTSONA
Baptism of Jesus

MARK 1:9-13

“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’” (NRS)

When this picture was displayed at our church last Spring, people were curious about Watanabe’s treatment of Jesus’ ribs. What was he trying to say?

We now know that Watanabe was greatly influenced by medieval European art. Here we see the influence of a 12th century wooden crucifix from St. Bernard Chapel, in Vance, France. The defined patterns of the rib cage are strikingly similar. One thing is clear. On the day of his baptism, Jesus set foot on the path that would lead to his cross.

Someone observed that he patterns of Jesus’ rib cage resemble the wave patterns of his baptismal waters. Could it be that Jesus has completely internalized the meaning of his baptism?

Jesus’ baptism was his ordination to a dual ministry. The voice from heaven quoted the coronation psalm of Israel’s kings: “You are my Son” (Psalm 2:7). That voice also quoted the “Servant Song”: “my chosen, in whom my soul delights” (Isaiah 42:1). As Messiah, Jesus was called to defeat the powers of evil and death. As Servant of God, Jesus was called to suffer in our behalf. As Watanabe makes clear, Jesus did what only the Messiah could do. He held these two callings together in perfect symmetrical balance.

How can we internalize the meaning of our baptism? We can begin by realizing that whenever God looks at us, at every baptized and believing Christian, he says to us what he said to Jesus that day: “You are my dear, dear, child. I’m delighted with you.” Reflect quietly on God saying that to you, not only on the day of your baptism, but every day.

Remember your baptism...and give thanks!
When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.”

Simon answered, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”

When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. (NIV)

If I have learned anything about fishing in all my years as an angler, it’s that once you think you’ve got the hang of it, something (or someone) comes along and screws it up. It can be the weather, the water temperature, or that the fish decided to simply stop eating. However, it could be that a better fisherman came along.

Peter, the career fisherman, thought he knew it all when it came to angling. He depended on his competency at reeling in fish. The guy in the middle of Watanabe’s print has to be Peter—he’s the one looking forward and chattin’ it up (with Jesus, presumably). Plus he’s holding the biggest fish—the sign of a cocky fisherman.

“Put out into deep water,” Jesus says.

Peter thought, “Really, Jesus? You are the carpenter’s son, the itinerant preacher, not a fisherman. You know your way around a woodshop and a synagogue, but I know fishing best.” Out loud, though, he says, “But because you say so…”

Never had he seen such a catch! What could this mean? Had Peter been fishing in the wrong spot? Did the weather change? No. Peter had met a better fisherman—one who knew both angling and knew Peter better than Peter did.

“From now on you will fish for people,” Jesus said…and screwed it all up. Peter was in the wrong profession. He wasn’t supposed to be fishing for fish, he was supposed to be fishing for people! And Peter went on to become the one on whom Jesus built his church.

I have held many fish in my hands. I have worked tirelessly at my “profession,” gaining the praise of people, and hopefully God. But I am thankful that Jesus came along and ‘screwed it all up’ when he asked me to, “Put out into deep water.” For he knows fishing, and me, much better than I do.

Lord Jesus, thank you that you know me far more intimately, far more intricately than I even know myself. Help me to hear your voice and heed your call when you say, “Put out into deep water.” Amen.

JIM COONS
Jesus Calls His Twelve Disciples

MATTHEW 3:13-15

“He climbed a mountain and invited those he wanted with him. They climbed together. He settled on twelve, and designated them apostles. The plan was that they would be with him, and he would send them out to proclaim the Word...” (The Message)

The whole book of Mark has a flow to it. Much like at creation when God formed (Days 1-3), then filled (Days 4-6), then rested; the book of Mark follows a similar rhythm where Jesus teaches, works/heals, then rests. That rhythm can be seen throughout the Gospel of Mark. Rhythm is essential to our life if we want to have something to offer to people we rub shoulders with. It took God seven days to create, but sometimes I feel like we only focus on the six days when He was “working” and don’t realize that the seventh day is just as important. It’s a day to restructure, to find something that gives life to us, to rest.

Henri Nouwen points out that when Jesus called his twelve disciples there was a rhythm to it. Jesus sought solitude, a place to get away from the crowds. The solitude piece is important because it is in solitude that we can quiet ourselves long enough for Jesus to remind us of who we are as his Beloved. Moving out of solitude Jesus gets the list of who his disciples will be. This is where he calls them into community. When I hear the word community, I hear “common” and “unity.” Coming together in a group that has a central focus, that encourages one another, that looks out for the good of others. Community is vital, it’s where we remind one another after we have been beat up by the world or discouraged that we truly are still the Beloved.

Lastly, Jesus gives them a mission. The mission is to restore what is lost, to heal the sick, to be in the business of taking things that are broken and making them whole. Essentially the mission is to tell others of their Belovedness.

The calling of the twelve disciples is a calling to Jesus himself. The disciples were called into relationship with Him. This season is the same for us: we are called, invited, beckoned by Jesus to himself. Will you pause for a few moments to hear his invitation?
The Boat in the Storm

MATTHEW 8:23-26

Then Jesus got into the boat and his disciples followed him. Suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went and woke him, saying, “Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!”

He replied, “You of little faith, why are you so afraid?” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.

The men were amazed and asked, “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!” (NIV)

The image is full of movement: waves reach high, wind whips torn sails, bodies tumble about. Even the print itself is askew - tilting and leaning and shifting precariously.

The eyes of the disciples tell of their fear. They look every direction: up at the roiling skies, sideways at one another in shared panic, and down... at the one calm, still figure in the picture. Jesus, asleep through it all.

I have often wondered why Jesus slept through this storm. Was it sheer exhaustion only? Or was He also modelling something essential for his followers?

“My friends... this is what Trust looks like.”

Trust. It’s pretty simple when you’re on shore, sharing some fish and an easy laugh. It’s pretty simple when things are... pretty simple. But then the wind shifts, and that uneasy feeling steals over your heart, and you fear the coming storm is too much for you.

And God says: “Get in the boat with Me.”

No! I don’t want to get into the boat! I like it on shore, where things are dry and warm and secure and predictable.

But we know the reality: life is full of storms - from little squalls to typhoons that seem to rage on forever. Many come when we least expect them, blowing in unseen and unanticipated. And there we are, tossed about in our tiny, fragile boats... wondering if we can possibly survive the tempest.

Here is what this surprising story tells us: God is in the boat. In the storm. In the uncertainty and the risk. In the pain and the fear and the disappointment.

And He speaks to us there, while the wind howls around us: “Do not be afraid, for I am with you... always.”

Lord: I choose to get in Your boat. Teach me what it means to trust You when the storms in my life are fierce and frightening. Teach me to trust when the waters are calm and I am tempted to forget about You. Teach me to rest - secure in the truth that You are bigger and deeper and more powerful than any storm. Amen.

JO ANNE CRIPE
Jesus Walks on Water

MARK 6:45-48

When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. He intended to pass them by. (RST)

The first question that came to my mind was this: Why the fish in this scene? The first answer seems to be that, through them, Watanabe brings a playfulness to the scene. It’s not all holy tones and hushed voices that we associated with “religious” moments and biblical encounters.

But more importantly, the Lord of heaven and earth has come. And the fish rejoice. They even dance. Japanese art has always maintained a great reverence for the created world, being sure to place human figures within a wider context, often creating human figures proportionately small and overshadowed by the natural world around them. In this scene, Watanabe places Jesus calmly on top of the water—with serenely blue waves as a backdrop—as he exercises dominion over the wind and waters. The disciples fear, but the wind and waves know their master.

Mark includes a startling phrase: “He intended to pass them by.” Though we often place the emphasis of the disciples’—and our—anxieties and needs, this story, according to Watanabe, is about Jesus. Apparently he’s not focusing on the disciples. And maybe we shouldn’t either. We certainly shouldn’t focus on ourselves. Yes, Jesus does ultimately tell the disciples not to fear as he calms the waves, but here Watanabe places the emphasis back to where it should be and away from our tendency toward narcissism: namely, on Jesus and his lordship. Jesus has all power, authority, and dominion. Does Jesus hear our cries and respond? Yes. Of course. Is Jesus still Lord of all creation whether or not he calms our fears and responds to our needs? Yes. And because of who Jesus is, the fish dance.

GREG COOTSONA
I am the True Vine

JOHN 15:1-4

I am the true vine and my father is the vinedresser. Every branch that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. (ESV)

I want to look at this familiar passage in a new way, to consider one human being’s desire to “abide in the vine.” Harue Watanabe, the artist’s wife, came from a paper-making family. “Harue soaked the soybeans whose milk was used as a binder for her husband’s paints, straining it through cloth. She also mixed a paste from rice bran, sticky rice, lime, and salt to cover the colored sections of each print sheet, so a final layer of black could be brushed on to bring out the lines marked by the stencil pattern. After the prints dried, Harue Watanabe would rinse them in water and clean off the resist-paste to reveal the final color image edged in black.” (“Beauty Given by Grace - The Biblical Prints of Sadao Watanabe”; CIVA and Square Halo Books).

Why share this? Consider with me: Jesus is clear and unambiguous in his statement that he is the “true” vine and not just any vine. The term “true” is from the Greek, alethine, and as an adjective can also be translated as “dependable, genuine, real.” Alethine was used frequently in John’s gospel and always in the context of contrasting truthfulness with falsehood. Sadao and his wife, Harue, would be very familiar with this verse, just as we are. To give up one’s own identity, interests and pursuits, it must be for something great, something grand. Something true. Sadao would produce hundreds of biblical scenes over nearly four decades and Harue would be intimately involved.

As a practicing mosaic and ceramic artist my hands take a beating. Cuts from glass and stone; dry skin with exposure to grout and clay. I think of Harue washing up at the end of a working day. Her husband’s favorite pigment was called “king’s yellow,” made from the mineral orpiment, containing arsenic trisulfide, very beautiful but poisonous. Black was made from pure carbon and would line her palms, even with gloves on. Both crushed seashells, which were used to make white pigment, and sticky rice, used for paper making, would lodge in her nail beds. Harue’s labor was not for fame. Busy building treasure in heaven, she would daily feel clean because of the Word that was spoken to her through her husband’s art. She would, in that way, abide in Jesus. And he would abide in her. Drying her hands, straightening her tired back, she would look in the mirror and know whom she had served: the One who was dependable, genuine, and real. The One who was True. Only then would a life such as hers be worthwhile.

Who do you serve? Who do you abide in? Listen for his voice. He says: Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.

LAUREN MESA
“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Whenever we see a painting or picture like this we recognize it immediately as telling us a story. Multiple characters, action, scenes separated by a decorative motif. We are walking into a narrative. Step on in.

Had you not first read the entire parable in the Bible, you would slowly pick out the characters: the main guy (in this case the manager); people planting, pruning, harvesting; a ripe vineyard filled with grapes, flowers, birds, and butterflies. If you looked at the one scene on the lower left you’d see a type of reckoning—people being paid or paying a fee. Each of them with the same amount. All is well.

The first little scene at the top left might hint that some have worked harder, others hard, and one not as much (suggested by the heaviness in the posture). Other than that, there isn’t a sign of disharmony.

So now reread the biblical account. One key element is added. The landowner recruits his workers by offering them a fair wage. He sets the pay and they accept it as the terms of employment. And as we see too in the print, they were paid the same regardless of the amount they worked.

The landowner set the terms. The workers accepted the terms. And yet, they call it unfair.

This is a parable, a story that is to illustrate a point. This parable compares this scene to the kingdom of heaven. God is like the landowner who willingly engages the people in his work and offers his reward (might be love or grace rather than a denarius). It’s God’s economy. And, we don’t always like it. We like to be rewarded based on how much we do. Rather, God rewards us based on His love.

Do you compare yourself to others? Are there those you know that really don’t deserve the same amount of grace that you do? Do you need to repent for trying to be God and give God back the role of judge? Give thanks that God’s justice errors on the side of grace. Someday you might find yourself with the short day and need to rely on his love.

LAURA COOTSONA
The Woman of Canaan

MATTHEW 15:21-28

And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.” But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying out after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” And he answered, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly. (ESV)

Pardon me, my Savior Jesus, but did you just refer to this woman using a racial slur? Is now really the time to bring up these ancient wounds between the Jews and Canaanites? It is not like you, Lord, to kick someone when she’s down, especially when she is down on a knee to worship you. Why do you ignore her cries? She is after all, risking rejection from her peers for acknowledging this Jewish Messiah. You have traveled slightly outside your regional boundaries; she has traveled far past her societal boundaries. A woman. A cursed Gentile. Mother of an impure daughter.

Are you silent because you are examining the hearts of the people with you? You’ve done that before. Do you find compassion, or only prejudice? Perhaps you sense their bristling as she touches you and you hear their unspoken derogatory comments. Perhaps you need to speak their thoughts aloud to address them properly. Perhaps the influence of Greek logic in her culture has made her quick to understand the symbolism; perhaps her situation has made her desperate enough to acquiesce to the humiliation. Forget sitting properly at the table; she will just snatch the crumbs like a begging house pet. A morsel is all that is needed, so convinced she is of your absolute goodness and awesome healing power. And so her faith is rewarded, and a life is returned to wholeness, and the disciples must grapple with racial and historical prejudice, exposed. They were the ones needing to change.

Ah, Jesus, so often I focus on the differences between people instead of the commonalities. You, who had every legal right to set yourself apart from her by virtue of nationality, gender and social status chose instead to find the connecting point – that of great faith. The artist must have grasped this concept from the story, for instead of painting you one color and her another, emphasizing the differences, he painted the two of you the same deep red, the same evergreen, the same bright white.

Lord, help me to live the message of this painting: with great faith, rejecting old grievances, and looking for the threads that connect me to another person no matter our differences.

TINA HOOVER
Well in Samaria

JOHN 4:7-10

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” (NIV)

The faces in Watanabe's prints remind us that the Japanese are well known for their inscrutability. Recently I learned that they have two words that hint at the divided self: *tatemae*, the part of myself I let people see on the outside; and *hon ne*, that which signifies what takes place on the inside where on one can see. Look closely: in this print, both Jesus and the Samaritan woman show us their divided selves. He appears to be an average Jew but he's really the Messiah. And the woman, try as hard as she might, hopes to pass herself off as an ordinary woman busy with the daily task of drawing water from the well. But more than likely she's there when other women are absent for fear of their rebuke, their judgment. She lives with men she's not married to, a lifestyle that's completely out of control. She's made her bed, as the saying goes. And here's the intrigue: Jesus knows this about her without anyone telling him so. He is able to penetrate beyond the *tatemae* and the *hon ne* to where no person can see. Because of this we know who she really is.

He does that for you and for me, too. He sees us. He sees us! And no matter what our condition, he invites us to the well. He says: “Whoever drinks of the water that I give shall never thirst; but the water that I give will become in you a well of water springing up to eternal life.” What a beautiful metaphor. An artesian well that springs up and has no boundaries, no limits! This is water that satisfies like nothing else.

Before she knew the Messiah the Samaritan woman was ignorant of who he was, of what he had to offer, and how she would receive his message. If you think about it, that's how it is for all of us when presented with the gospel. Though we may already have a relationship with Christ and think we know the answers to these questions, it might benefit us to ask them again. Who are you today, Jesus? What do you offer me? How shall I receive you? Three questions for those who thirst. Answer them and water will never be the same.

Lord, I'm often no different than the Japanese people who only allow people to see what's on the outside - *tatemae*. Help me to trust you with the *hon ne*, that which takes place on the inside where no one can see. Help me to share my true self with others.

LAUREN MESA
The Good Samaritan

LUKE 10:30-35

But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. (RSV)

This scene appears to be set when the good Samaritan puts the wounded, beaten man on his own animal. Cast in the vivid red of urgency, with the injured man’s head almost completely sideways and his mouth down as signs of distress, the Samaritan is blessing the man with his hand raised, palm open. He is not just offering a prayer of benediction, but he also becomes an agent of his healing by bandaging wounds and taking him to be cared for.

Watching through a window are two figures, with eyes hollowed out by their lack of compassion, these are probably the priest and the Levite who had already walked by, figuring no hated Samaritan deserved mercy, or could be conceivably called their neighbor. Are they repelled by the Samaritan’s good and kind acts or are they ashamed? We cannot be sure.

But maybe the better question is to ourselves: Are we aghast at the audacity of this kindness or provoked to action ourselves? It’s good to be reminded that “good” and “Samaritan” were not two words that first century Jews put together. It was the Samaritans, after all, who were seen as siding with the hated Assyrians when they destroyed the northern Jewish tribes in 721 BC.

“The good Samaritan”—what that might sound like to us? The good Muslim? The good atheist? The good Democrat? The good Republican? Whoever it is, that person is our neighbor. Let’s be ready today for God’s grace to take us somewhere unexpected.
But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ (NRSV)

There isn’t a scene in this familiar story that isn’t important. When the younger son negotiates with his father for his share of the inheritance (essentially telling his father that it would be better if he were to die), when that same son loses everything and resorts to eating pig scraps or when that son gets to his wit’s end. Each artist through the ages chooses to depict a different angle of this story.

Here we find the son after he has come down the road and has rehearsed his speech of repentance. We are in the prime moment, the apex of the story: the Father’s blessing.

It is a lovely scene. Watanabe uses nature, a rolling hill, and a beautiful robe to suggest a peaceful moment in this high drama. The father has accepted the son who kneels in a position of humility. The Father is sober, relieved to have his son back, and he is calmly granting a blessing renewing the young man’s sonship, his belovedness, and his rightful place in the home. The animal, probably a dog, is just there to witness the reunion.

Take a few minutes to put yourself in their sandals. First, imagine yourself that son. He has done more than a little wrong. He is now back begging for forgiveness and a chance to be as a slave in his father’s house. What does that feel like to be so unworthy? To have made so many mistakes and to have suffered for them? What does it feel like to you to receive the Father’s blessing? His unmerited favor? Take it in.

As Watanabe would say, “May God breathe on you.”

Now shift to being the Father. Is there a younger son in your life who needs an embrace of grace? Who needs a no-questions-asked invitation home? Who needs to be reminded of the grace of his maker? Do you have an opportunity to be the welcoming parent?
Good Shepherd

JOHN 10:11

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (NIV)

Resolved. It is the word that comes to mind when looking upon the face of the good shepherd in Watanabe’s portrayal of this shepherd holding his sheep. The good shepherd, slightly bending toward earth, carefully cradling the sheep like his own child, whispering its name so only it can hear—is resolved. He is resolved, for he is doing what he is supposed to be doing—shepherd ing. His life is meant to be lived in care of his sheep: finding them when they wander off, leading them to cool water, shading them from the scorching sun, and rescuing them from intruders that threaten their lives.

Resolved. It is the word that comes to mind when considering Jesus, our Good Shepherd. The sacrificed savior, head hung low in the twilight, arms stretched wide, pinned up for all to see, beaten, spat upon, mocked, yet whispering your name so only you can hear—is resolved. He is resolved, for he is doing what he is supposed to be doing—saving. Jesus’ life is meant to be lived as savior of his people: finding them when they wander off, leading them to cool waters, shading them from the scorching sun, and rescuing them from intruders that threaten their lives.

Jesus, your Good Shepherd, is resolved in his love for you. He has sought you out, called your name, led you to times of refreshment, rescued you from imminent danger, and holds you like his own—for that is what you are, his beloved child.

Take a moment of quiet reflection, recounting how Jesus, your Good Shepherd, has loved you throughout your life.

JIM COONS
Mary Magdalene

LUKE 8:1-2

Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out... (ESV)

I was sixteen, in bellbottoms and an embroidered shirt, when I saw Mary Magdalene at the Prado Museum in Madrid, Spain. Staring at a painting of this weeping woman with outstretched arms, I was overcome with the strong sense that I would one day be very familiar with the depth of her sorrow. At the time I credited this to my own intuition, but I was not that wise and knew nothing of my future. The truth was that I did not recognize the voice of the Spirit.

The more I study Watanabe’s life and work, the more I come to realize that this humble Japanese artist, who considered the act of art a form of worship, listened to the Spirit. It began with the genesis of each print. After choosing a biblical theme, the artist read the scripture that accompanied it, and did this not once, but repeatedly. Then he meditated on it. And lastly, he prayed. All this before the paper itself was touched. Little wonder that his portrayal of the Magdalene is true to the biblical account.

We don’t know the nature of Mary’s deliverance yet many have seen fit to describe her as a prostitute or fallen woman even though Scripture does not support this. Watanabe shares this straight-forward, powerful news: Jesus is healing Mary of seven demons and she is made whole and well! Immediately afterward, she will give all she owns to Jesus’ ministry and then she and a few other women will follow along with the twelve.

Notice Jesus’ face, upraised toward heaven. He’s listening; he does what the Father tells him to do. This Jesus, the one Mary will soon call Rabboni, Teacher, is first her Healer. So tenderly do his hands rest on her bowed head. A circle of hands, her own prayerful ones included, surround Mary. This is worth noticing because it is where Watanabe directs our gaze. These are grateful hands. Mary’s eyes, closed for the moment, will open to the One who has brought her healing. And she will not need more to convince her. The decision to follow him comes swiftly. She will go further than most - to the cross, and then to the tomb.

How far will you follow Jesus? Don’t answer too quickly...if we take the road less traveled there is cost involved. Take a few minutes to consider what Jesus has freed you from. Then ask yourself again: how far will you follow him?

LAUREN MESA
Triumphant Entry

Mark 11:7-11

“Hosanna!”

Jesus enters into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah. People laud him with “Hosanna!” (meaning, “Save!”), and with echoes of Psalm 118. This is indeed a triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

Watanabe’s rendering of this event is quite “busy.” In looking at the image, one can almost hear the crowd and feel the excitement of that day. Cloaks strewn across the road (something only done for royalty), branches and flowers flying about (again, something done only for a king or queen), birds and an angel flitting in the air. There is lots of action. The frenetic action of excitement. The excitement of a royal reception. A reception fit for a king.

Jesus received the royal treatment upon his entry into Jerusalem. The people did not yet know that he was the sort of royalty to which the world was not accustomed. Shortly after his entry into Jerusalem, in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus confused people by “cleansing” the temple, teaching in parables and metaphors, and challenging the religious leaders who were present. And of course finally Jesus was arrested and put to death. The cheers turned to jeers. This was not the king they expected.

That’s the beautiful and sometimes scary reality of Jesus. He’s not what we expect. It’s easy for us to lay out our cloaks, wave our branches, and shout “Hosanna!” when all is going well in our lives. It’s not so easy when we are called upon to “turn the other cheek,” or to be servants to others by putting their needs above our own, or to give up all that we have to follow Him. It is the greatest challenge of a Christian to be loyal to Jesus when he doesn’t meet our expectations of a king. Even his closest disciples abandoned him at the hour of his death, afraid for themselves and disappointed in their unmet expectations. Can we continue to throw our cloaks and wave our branches during all the moments of our lives, no matter how Christ our King may unexpectedly meet us in our lives?

Shannon Christopher
Jesus Washing Peter’s Feet

John 13:12-15

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” (NRSV)

I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall when Jesus got up from the supper table and washed his disciples’ feet. What were the looks on their faces? What thoughts were going through their minds?

Jesus was a model for the disciples on what an intimate relationship with God looked like. He modeled how to pray and to what great lengths grace went. He also modeled what servant leadership looks like. In the first 12 chapters of John love is mentioned six times but in chapters 13-17 it’s mentioned 31 times. The closer Jesus gets to the Cross the more he focuses on Love.

In this piece of art we see Jesus, Peter and an angel. I love how Watanabe focuses his attention on Jesus and Peter, the central characters in the chapter. The disciples were always jockeying for position, trying to figure out who would be the greatest (see Matthew 20:20-21) and the response from Jesus is the same: “The last will be first.”

I recently spent a few months studying this passage and the three sided table that would have culturally been used had specific spots for people to sit. On one side were seats of honor and on the other side, seats for servants. Without going into much detail there are clues in Scripture that show us Peter is seated on the opposite side of the table from Jesus, the seats for the servants or the “last.” I believe Jesus was giving Peter the opportunity to be the “last” and wash the feet of others. He missed his chance to be the greatest and serve so Jesus got up to model for Peter, and for us, what Love looks like.

Do you have an opportunity to serve or model love for someone who would least expect it? What would it look like for you to love the least of these? Jesus was focused on Love as he got closer to the Cross. What would you say your focus has been on lately?

Matt Hock
The Last Supper  (1966)

MATTHEW 26:26-30

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the[a] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.” And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. (ESV)

Look closely at this Table: it’s shaped like a fish. At the end of it sit two disciples, the one with his back to us more than likely Judas. The tail fans out there. It makes me think about the times I’ve cleaned fish my husband’s brought home. Under running tap water I rub my hand down the slippery body all the way to the tail, imagining the energy that had allowed it to weave through water, suddenly gone. The tail’s a strong fan, a life-force, the source of the fish’s energy, like our legs. Think of it: without a tail the fish would die because it wouldn’t be able to move. Think of this Table of the Last Supper moving through the centuries as something alive.

Let’s keep imagining things together as we look at this print, as we read the words of scripture. Picture young Sadao sitting down to dinner with his family. A Buddhist mother, Christian father, and one brother. Perhaps he imagined it would always be this way, the four of them eating together at the low table. But Sadao’s father would die when the boy was ten; he would be left with the memory of his father tending bonsai trees and singing hymns. The image of his father’s face would soon become dim. An elementary teacher would notice him, invite him to her Presbyterian church. He’d attend but with hesitation: should he accept the claims of the Christians? Perhaps he feared ostracism in a culture that disdained the Christian faith. As a teen, bedridden with tuberculosis for two years, he’d spend time comparing Buddhism and Christianity. He’d read the Bible. A juncture then, the waters splitting into two streams. Which would he take? When he was healed he believed it was due to the power of prayer, which led to his baptism and soon afterwards, his mother’s. Another juncture. A marriage then to Harue, who became his life-partner in every way. Together they would convey the gospel through the art that they believed God had given them to do. They would have a daughter and their table would grow. And then another, and later, a son. More growing. And always, at the head of the table, just as in this print, would sit the Living God. Around his head, a nimbus. His hand, blessing the bread. His presence, true, constant. This Table that looks like a fish, against a deep red background, the color of blood, of sacrifice. A Table that has gone against the current just like fish do, just as Sadao did in a culture where less than 2 percent profess Christianity. The Table stands the test of time, it endures. And it does not stand alone – there are always disciples around it. You, me. My family and yours.

It is the Table of Thanksgiving, a place where the One who has words of joy and hope spreads his hands wide. We enter the current together. And we remember.

What are you thankful for today?

LAUREN MESA
The Last Supper (1973)

LUKE 22:17-20

And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, “Take this, and divide it among yourselves. For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” (ESV)

Watanabe considered this subject worthy of several prints. I’m writing about it twice myself, using my eyes in new ways, just as the artist did when creating this print. Now look at the eyes of each disciple seated at a meal that is now called The Last Supper. Some appear closed while others are inquiring. Others wear a slight frown which might indicate ponderous thinking, something that seems likely for they had just heard strange words from Jesus’ lips as he broke bread with them: this is my body, which is given for you.

Now look at John’s eyes. They’re uniquely different, in the shape of teardrops. And as always, his bowed head leans against Jesus’ shoulder. That he called himself the “Beloved disciple” I find to be entirely beautiful. There are times when I ask my Lord: who am I to you? The answer is dear to my heart, personal. It makes me think that John knew to call himself that because it was Jesus’ intention that he do so.

In preparing for this show and this Lenten devotional I have given myself over to the Japanese culture by immersing myself in Japanese books, art and poetry. I’ve done this because I was without familiarity with the Japanese and had no bond whatsoever. My only connection was from childhood: my father, an air force pilot, often brought home gifts from his frequent trips to Japan. A kimono clad doll with wigs, transistor radio, coins that were wonderful because the yen had holes in their centers. As a young reader who would become cause oriented, I happened upon a few books that came close to sparking a deeper interest, one about Hiroshima survivors, the other about the labor camps for Japanese Americans during World War II. But when those books were finished so was my interest because I did not know anyone who was Japanese and moved on to other pursuits, other causes.

It wasn’t until last year, when I “met” Sadao Watanabe during our first Lenten art show in cooperation with CIVA, that I was changed. But Watanabe’s art alone without his story would not have been enough to captivate me. The process began when I learned about his life devoted to his faith and art. Rarely have I seen such dedication! I then read books by one of Japan’s master writers, Shusaku Endo, which allowed me to become familiar with the history of Christianity in that land (“Silence,” respected by many as one of the 20th century’s finest novels) and to comprehend how uniquely a modern Japanese person might experience Christianity (“Deep River”). I began to feel the Spirit breathe on me. As it says in Ephesians, I felt the eyes of my heart being enlightened. Now I can say with deep feeling that my heart, formerly blase about the Japanese people, has been transformed. Now, when looking at Watanabe’s art I am not set apart from it. I am a disciple at the table. Flying geese and thin flowing reeds adorn my kimono and my stiff getas are off to the side so that my bare feet cross easily while I sit. So delicately do I hold my small saki cup. Tai, the main course, a large sea bream, is served whole on a plate with the head to the left of the honored guest, who is Jesus. And just like John, I am nestled near him, my eyes like teardrops. He looks at me and his glance lingers. Then he smiles. What he gives me at this meal is bread and drink - all of himself. All my life I’ve looked for this. And here it is.

This Table has been set for you. Sit next to the Lord Jesus and taste and see that he is good...

LAUREN MESA
Jesus on the Cross

LUKE 23:44-46

“It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice said, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.’ Having said this, he breathed his last.” (NRS)

Mel Gibson’s film, “The Passion of Christ” and Sadao Watanabe’s painting, “Jesus on the Cross” agree on this: Jesus was covered with wounds and crowned with thorns.

How does Watanabe interpret Jesus’ cross? Shusaku Endo maintains that the Japanese have little tolerance for “a transcendent being who judges human beings harshly, then punishes.” Like most of us, they are more responsive to a God who suffers with us and for us. Here is the Christ who “has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows,” who was wounded by our transgressions in order that he might truly forgive us.

In dark blue, Watanabe portrays the “darkness that came over the whole land.” On that day, the best government in the world, the best justice system in the world, the best religion in the world, the strongest economy in the world, and the best army in the world conspired to destroy the One who embodied the love and the presence of God. It doesn’t get much darker than that! But in the end, the greatest concentration of evil the world has ever known could not defeat the love and grace of God.

To an American audience, the face of Christ seems curiously impassive, as do most of the faces in Watanabe’s paintings. Watanabe’s figures resemble actors in traditional Noh theater, where actors wear masks and communicate meaning through body language. Here, the gently curved, outstretched arms of Christ wait to embrace the whole world. They welcome us to the new access we have to God, “the new and living way that he has opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh).” (Hebrews 10:19-25)

“Let us approach with a true heart, and with full assurance of faith.”

ALLEN MCCALLUM
Descent from the Cross

JOHN 19:38

“Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate’s permission, he came and took the body away.” (NIV)

As a protestant it has bothered me that we move so rapidly from the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday to the empty tomb on Easter Sunday. While living in Italy as an 18 year old I was drawn deeply into this week through the stations of the cross: a religious and artistic tradition of narrating each part of the journey of Jesus and the cross.

When my children were young I would display fine art to depict the scriptures in between the Sundays depicting Holy Week. Why do we shy from these details? Is it our fear of the rawness of the cross? Our inability to explain that our salvation came at a cost that was not all hallalujahs and hosannas? More than palm fronds and lilies?

The deposition or descent from the cross is near the end of that week’s progression. Watanabe shows us a beautiful geometric cross with the diagonal overlay of the ladder used for Joseph of Arimathea to bring the now dead Jesus down. There is no question of the state of Jesus’ body. It is obviously limp and heavy. One character drapes his arms around his torso while Joseph tries to reach and lower him down. One more unties the bound feet. With the exception of Joseph, each look down. One in prayer. One in tears (a rare expression of emotion for Japanese printmaking). The backdrop is crimso and Jesus is unmistakingly white. We look more to their body postures for mood and emotion than to facial cues.

This year, dare to walk through Holy Week with Jesus. Imagine yourself in this very scene. Who would you be? What would you be doing? How would you handle your emotions?

Jesus, thank you for your sacrifice. It wasn’t all pretty. But it was complete. Amen.
An Easter tradition at a church I attended for many years consisted of the Pastor shouting, “He is risen!” The congregation would shout back, “He is risen indeed!” Three times we would shout this out. Every single year it felt so good to proclaim the reason that we call ourselves Christian. He is risen. Hallelujah! (NIV)

Watanabe’s rendering of “Christ Risen” employs basic colors and lines. Three figures, Christ in the middle and two angels at his side. There is no action in this image, just presence. He is no longer in the tomb. He is present, here and now. Among the many things that the Resurrection claims in our faith tradition, we can take much comfort in the claim that Jesus is alive and present within us and among us. “Christ Risen” means for us: “Christ Present.”

Christ’s presence assures us that we are never alone in this world. We can take comfort knowing that our God is not millions of miles away “up there.” Rather, His closeness is not any further from the beating of our own hearts.

In addition, Christ’s presence in our lives has certain implications. It carries various responsibilities. We might say that Christ is present in our lives, but do our lives show forth his presence? Would others be able to recognize his presence in our lives? Having Christ present in our lives implies that we are called upon to be Christ’s witnesses to the world. And so Christ’s presence in our lives is something for us to savor and to snuggle-up to, but it’s also something to channel and bear witness to. This is so very life-giving for us. We breathe-in Christ’s presence and we breathe it out.

Lord of Life, we welcome the resurrected Christ’s presence into our lives. We take comfort in knowing that He lives within us and is always so close to us. And we can consider it a privilege to make his presence in our lives known to others. Help us to bear witness to Christ so that others may feel His presence in their lives. We join the chorus of angels in praising your holy name — Hallelujah!
When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” (NIV)

It has been three days since Jesus died. Three long, interminable days. Weighed down by grief and despair, the disciples move in a fog of heavy, energy-sucking disbelief.

A stranger joins two of them as they walk to a neighboring town, and asks about their troubled spirits. Words tumble out in a torrent of pain and abandonment: “We thought... He told us... and now He's gone... The women say... but we can’t believe it...”

And at the heart of it all: “What are we to do now?”

Their new companion walks with them, and calmly speaks wisdom and truth into their spirits. He takes them back to the Scripture they know so well, and reminds them of what Jesus had taught about the sacrificial role the Messiah would play. Their hearts are stirred...

And then the stranger reveals himself. It is their Lord who sits between them, doing what he has done countless times: sharing sustenance, speaking the truth, loving them, and transforming doubt and despair into purpose and joy. This print captures the expressions of the two disciples at a moment in time: one wide-eyed as the truth hits him, the other literally grasping Jesus as the tangible source of peace and comfort.

And isn’t that the way it goes so often? Unexpected, challenging, frightening times hit. We feel buried under the hurt and questions. And then – in the midst of our fear and pain - there He is. There He has been all along. Our gracious God never leaves us for a moment.

The promise of God’s presence is still true for us today: “Be strong and courageous... The Lord Himself goes before you and will be with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.” (Deuteronomy 31:7-8)

What assurance! In every circumstance of my life, my God is there ahead of me.

Thank you, loving Lord, for Your unfailing presence in every moment. Help me to remember this great promise: You love me and go before me into every life challenge. When I arrive there, You are present already, working circumstances to Your glory.

Thank you, great and gracious God.
Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (RST)

In this print, the four mouths appear to be almost drinking in the fires of Pentecost. They take in the Spirit with an amazing thirst. And the Spirit responds by giving them other languages, in fact the discrete languages of the various ethnic groups represented.

I have often felt that the main message of Pentecost is that God’s Spirit gives us power to speak the vernacular, the language that each person dreams in. Almost everyone on that Pentecost day would have known the Greek language, but here God gifts the church with native tongues, appropriate to each ethnic group. “And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites” (and the list continues…). Might we also add this today? We learn to speak in the language of science, of the academy, of the street, of art...

The gift of the Spirit at Pentecost means that the gospel of Christ is for the people, in all their glorious ethnic and culture diversity. The Holy Spirit doesn’t restrict the gospel message to the special, to a certain favored nation or ethnic group, to the elite. (That was the case of the mystery religions and Gnosticism in the first century). The vision that John later proclaims in Revelation is of “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes [in Greek ethne, or ethnic groups] and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev. 17:9).

Though Watanbe’s prints now hang in the British Museum, New York’s Museum of Modern Art, the Vatican, and in various church buildings—and undoubtedly these are great honors—he had a different intent: “I don’t want my works simply decorating churches. I would most like to see them hanging where ordinary people gather, because Jesus brought the gospel for the people.” Just like the Spirit did at Pentecost.

Lord, make us ready to celebrate the marvelous diversity of Your people. Spirit, give us power to speak the gospel clearly in the vernacular You’ve taught me.

GREG COOTSONA
The Fourth Angel Blew His Trumpet

REVELATION 8:12

The fourth angel sounded his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them turned dark. A third of the day was without light, and also a third of the night. (NIV)

Any time we come to the book of Revelation, we remember that it is not telling us any new truth, but it is telling us the truth in a new, imaginative way. So when we read about the seven angels blowing the seven trumpets in chapter 8 we must ask, “God, what truth are you trying to tell me again?”

In one word, the answer is judgment. God’s judgment is being poured out on the earth, as seen here in Watanabe’s image of the darkening sun, moon, and stars, and his portrayal of the eagle who warns, “Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the trumpet blasts about to be sounded by the other three angels!” (v.13)

Judgment, especially God’s judgment, is often heard with negative ears and fearful hearts. But the judgment of God is not something to shy away from (though we should have healthy reverence for it). The fact that God judges means that God has opinions—strong opinions—about the way things ought to be. And when he judges it means that God no longer is distant, but has come near, expressed his feeling, and made himself known in deeper, more intimate ways.

The world is not the way it is supposed to be as evidenced by the scars, wars, diseases, deep losses and widespread desperation we see daily. As a church we cry out for things to be made right when we pray, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” God’s judgment is a sure sign that he has taken notice of us, heard our prayer, and is taking our human condition seriously. God’s judgment is his answer to our cry for justice!

It is a sign of God’s grace that he judges—for he does so justly in light of his own revealed truth and hope. And what is that? It is that in the end good wins. Evil looses. And God reigns eternally. It is the truth and hope of the risen and reigning Christ!

Where do you call out for God’s judgment and justice today?

JIM COONS
On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. (NIV)

Corporate worship... such a Divine mystery. How we, as constrained as we are in our humanity, can breach all barriers and join with angels singing Holy, Holy, Holy, defies our understanding. Bringing individuals together with different nationalities, theology, spiritual practices and musical preferences defies our abilities. Corporate worship is truly an act of the Spirit.

The magi, mysterious themselves, join this eternal activity in Matthew's description of the birth of Jesus. Twelve verses tell us all that we know about these travelers, creating more questions than answers. These Magi play a brief but crucial role. Some postulate that the gold they brought funded the family's flight to Egypt. They certainly bought the family time by not going back to Herod after finding Jesus. We don't know how long they stayed or what they said to Mary and Joseph — if they said anything, considering the possible language barrier. They don't take center stage very long; indeed, they don't take center stage at all. They sought, they found, they worshiped and they left.

It may not have been too easy to seek and find. Maybe they had different ideas of how to conduct the search. Maybe they argued. After all, even though they are referred to as a unit, they were still individuals. Sadao subtly reminds us of their individuality by the distinctive patterns or different colors on their kimonos. They are separate, but they fuse when they assume the same posture of worship. Looking at the paintings we see these astrologers have now turned their gaze from the light of the stars to the Light of the World. Whatever differences they had were laid aside as they focused adoration on the newborn king.

So much in society sidetracks us from worshiping Jesus. It's so easy to be distracted by all the palace finery rather than staying firmly focused with our eyes on Jesus.

Show me, Lord, the things in my life that distract me from you. Help me to practice adoration of you, Jesus, for you are Christ, the Lord.

TINA HOOVER
“But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.” (NIV)

Sadao Watanabe expressed two desires for his art; first “to find a way of expressing my Christianity within a Japanese context”; second, that his art would hang “where people ordinarily gather, because Jesus brought the gospel for the people”. The evangelical mixes well with the every day.

These two prints are undeniably Japanese. The flowers that reach toward the mother and child and on the blanket covering them resemble the beautiful patterns on Japanese kimonos – and Sadao certainly made many of them in his time as a textile dyer. Joseph leans over the distinctly Japanese hibachi, stoking the fire and readying it to cook “tai,” the good fortune fish prepared at times of family celebration. Red, the color of success, is prominent in both prints. The scenes themselves, though, are universal. A husband cooks while his wife rests with the baby. A mother takes a child for a walk outside. Practical. Ordinary.

In almost all of Sadao’s prints Mary carries the baby Jesus. Only a few have him apart from her, lying in that famous manger. These two prints remind us of the astounding truth that for years Jesus relied on his parents, just humans, for care, love and protection. During this time of his life, as the prints depict, he was literally close to Mary’s heart. Eating. Walking. Resting.

How would it be if I carried Jesus close to my heart, into my mundane, everyday world? If I could bring Jesus into every situation I encounter? In caring for my own children. In speaking to my spouse. As I cook a meal, work, walk with friends, as I gather where ordinary people gather, how would all of this be different with his presence so real it felt like I was holding a sweet and precious baby close to me?

His resurrection makes this possible. By the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, Christ lives in you. In me. Our everyday moments of life are made holy by the presence of the Savior.

Ask to be more aware of the presence of Christ in the ordinary moments of your life.
The Fine Arts Ministry Team of Second Presbyterian Church expresses its gratitude to Bidwell Presbyterian Church of Chico, California, for permission to duplicate the devotionals contained in this booklet, contributed by its members and staff as a companion to the CIVA traveling art exhibit. They are reprinted with permission. Further duplication of these copyrighted materials is not permitted.

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At age 17, Sadao Watanabe (1913-1996) was baptized a Christian and he quickly combined his new faith with an interest in preserving the traditional Japanese folk art of stencil dying, or katazome. Over time, Watanabe came to be Japan’s leading artist to portray biblical scenes.

Even though Watanabe’s art can be found in the most important museums in the world, he always desired to have his work displayed where it could be seen and enjoyed by ordinary people.