

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***



Volume XXV, No. 1 (Issue 50) May 2017

# God of the “In Between” in Humanity, Space, and Time in Japan

Roger W. Lowther

**Abstract:** The Apostle John tells us, “I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev 7:9). In heaven and on earth, we find people from every language and culture. These cultural differences give insights into the essence of the Gospel and the person of Christ. The short meditation that follows explores some of those insights through the Japanese concept of “ma” (in between) as found in the Japanese concepts of humanity, space, and time.

When entering a home in another culture, you will most likely notice some differences. You may be asked to take your shoes off. You may be unaccustomed to the style of furniture or decorations. You may be unfamiliar with the smell in the air due to spices or incense. You may not understand what is being said, because different places often have different languages and cultures.

Language can give insights into culture. Consider the Japanese word for “human” 人間 pronounced “nin-gen.” What an interesting word! It is a combination of the words “person” and “in between.”

Humanity, in its essence, consists of not only the 人 “person” but also the 間 “in between” of each person. This “in between” is important as it expresses identity as much as personality, gifts, and appearance.

A cursory look at this concept of “in between” can reveal ways to think about ministry and missions and give us a deeper understanding of the Gospel and the person of Christ.



*Roger W. Lowther serves as the Director of Faith and Art at Grace City Church Tokyo ([www.gracecitychurch.jp](http://www.gracecitychurch.jp)) and Director of Community Arts Tokyo ([www.communityarts.jp](http://www.communityarts.jp)). [rogerlowther@gmail.com](mailto:rogerlowther@gmail.com)*

## God of the “In Between” of Humanity

In the context of 人間 “humanity,” the 間 “in between” describes relationships: 仲間 and 間柄 “close relationship,” i.e., relationship to family, friends, or a teacher; 世間 society, i.e., relationship to a community; 民間 civilian, i.e., relationship to a nation; and others. The Japanese word for humanity shows us how we depend on our relationships with God, each other, and this world.

The importance of the “in between” in humanity becomes clearest when it is broken.

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as He was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?” He answered, “I heard You in the garden, and I was afraid . . . so I hid” (Gn 3:8–10).

When mankind disobeyed God, the space “in between” God and man was broken. Man became afraid. He felt isolated, abandoned, and spiritually empty.

Isaiah wrote, “Your iniquities have separated you from your God” (Is 59:2). A gaping chasm pierced the space “in between” God and humanity.

The importance of the “in between” in humanity becomes clearest when it is broken.

The relationship between people was also broken. Human beings turned into isolated individuals unable to relate to each other in healthy and loving ways. Danger, poverty, hunger, discrimination, and violence entered the world.

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” “I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gn 4:8–9).

The relationship between human beings and the earth was broken as well. “Cursed is the ground because of you” (Gn 3:17).

People lost important elements of their humanity. They fell from what they once were and began to war with God, each other, and the world. In order to heal mankind, God restored the “in between” of humanity.

The Trinitarian God, eternally existing in loving relationship, came into this world as the perfect 人間 “human” to fulfill the “in between” with God, people, and this earth. “The Word became 人間 ‘human’ and lived with us.” (Jn. 1:14)

God is love, and this love comes down, fills our “in betweens,” and “binds everything together” (Col 3:14). The Gospel narrative tells not just of saving mankind but of the restoration of love and the intimacy of relationship.

“[Mary] will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call Him Immanuel!” (which means “God with us”) (Mt 1:21–23).

God who is “with us” is also “between us.” God comes to us relationally and restores the “in between” of humanity. He seeks us from the beginning of the Bible in Genesis, where He asks “Where are you?” (chapter 3), to the end of the Bible in Revelation, where He says “I stand at the door and knock” (also chapter 3!).

God has been persistently pursuing us in the intimacy of relationship throughout human history. His pursuit has profound impact on our relationships when we realize that Christ, and not humanity, is the Lord of the “in between”—our Mediator—in our relationships with God, each other, and this world.

The Trinitarian God,  
eternally existing in  
loving relationship,  
came into this world as  
the perfect 人間 “human”  
to fulfill the “in between”  
with God, people,  
and this earth.

### **God of the Space “In Between”**

There are two places I recommend that all my friends visit on their first trip to Tokyo: Meiji Shrine, the Shinto shrine dedicated to the Emperor Meiji, and Sensoji Temple, Tokyo’s oldest Buddhist Temple.

Both locations are reached by entering a huge gate and following a long pathway, but the two pathways could not be more different! The way to Meiji Shrine is lined with trees, water, rocks, and expansive open spaces (空間, “the empty in between”). Though located in the middle of the city, it feels completely removed. A peaceful quiet fills the air. In contrast, the way to Sensoji Temple is lined with shops selling food and souvenirs, full of people and the energy of city life.

The two are different, yet they have something in common with all temples and shrines: a gate, a path, and a main building. The gate and main building are of course important, but the path “in between” is also important. The journey along the long path is an extremely meaningful and memorable part of the experience.

Jesus said, “I am the gate” (Jn 10:9) and “I am the way” (Jn 14:6). He also said, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” . . . The temple He had spoken of was His body” (Jn 2:19–21).

Jesus is the gate, the path, and the temple.

Christians in the West tend to focus on “at the gate” experiences of conversion or “at the temple” experiences of God’s presence, but “along the path” experiences are also important, especially in Japan!

What is an “along the path” experience?

Consider various activities that follow a “path” or “way” 道 (pronounced “dō”) in Japan: 柔道 (Judo, The Way of Flexibility), 剣道 (Kendo, The Way of the Sword), 弓道 (Kyudo, Archery or The Way of the Bow), 茶道 (Sado, The Way of Tea), 華道 (Kado/Ikebana or The Way of Flowers), 書道 (Shodo, Calligraphy or The Way of Writing), 武士道 (Bushido, The Way of the Samurai), etc. All involve slow and steady physical, emotional, or spiritual training.

I have been studying Shinkyokushinkai Karate in Japan with my boys for years now. I first started Shotokan Karate as a child when I was bullied in school and needed a way to protect myself. Since then, I have realized there is more to karate than self-defense.

Karatedo 空手道 is made of three very simple words meaning “the way of the empty hand.”

“The way of the empty hand” shows me small truths about myself. It is a litmus test of my daily patterns. Are they balanced? Are they healthy? Karate produces life in me by making me aerobically fit and reducing stress. It builds discipline and control over movement and emotions. It builds flexibility to prevent serious injury. The way of karate is a path, but not the end goal itself, to living more fully in this world.

Jesus called Himself the complete and everlasting “way, truth, and life”; therefore, early Christians called themselves followers of “The Way.”

“There arose a great disturbance about the Way” (Acts 19:23).

“I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death” (Acts 22:4).

“I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the Way” (Acts 24:14).

What does it mean to be a follower of “The Way”?

Jesus is “The Way” that leads to God and His grace. The Gospel does not just show us how to live the Christian life but affirms that Jesus already walked that path for us. Nothing we do can change His love for us. The Gospel does not just show us a way to follow but helps us recognize our wandering to the right and to the left in weakness.

The Gospel shows us Jesus. Jesus followed the “in between” path with perfect obedience. Followers of “The Way” follow Jesus as fallen people in a fallen world in the guiding light of God’s grace.

Jesus is the gate, and Jesus is the temple. Jesus is also the “in between” space. In this space, we find joy and fulfillment. In this space, our spirits find freedom and our spirits can dance. In this space, we see the person of Jesus.

## **God of the Time “In Between”**

The Japanese understanding of time is perhaps the most fascinating of the three. Time is a combination of two words: 時間 (“in between” and “time”). What does it mean to be “in between” time?

Humanity’s original concept of time came from the first day of Creation, when God made the night and the day. “There was evening, and there was morning—the first day” (Gn 1:5).

What does it mean to be  
“in between” time?

We get our concept of the week from God’s creation of the Sabbath and our concept of the month from God’s creation of the moon. Though mysterious in its implications, we also get our concept of the seasons from the tree of life, which “yields its fruit every month” in both Eden and heaven. “On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month” (Rev 22:2). There are some kinds of seasons in heaven!

The seasons heavily influence the Japanese concept of time. Nobel Prize winner Yasunari Kawabata said in his acceptance speech, “We [Japanese] brush against and are awakened by the beauty of the four seasons.”<sup>1</sup> Studies in the national and cultural identity of Japan point to the importance of the seasons. Writers of haiku and other poetry developed a formulaic use of “seasonal words” unheard of in neighboring Asian countries.<sup>2</sup>

Japanese literature often captures the importance and beauty of transitions in the seasons and from one time to another, as can be seen in Sei Shonagon’s opening to *The Pillow Book* from the tenth century. “In spring, the dawn—when the slowly paling mountain rim is tinged with red, and wisps of faintly crimson-purple cloud float in the sky.”<sup>3</sup>

This sensitivity to time in transition showed up in the film, *Your Name*, by Makoto Shinkai, which artfully explores the “in between” of day and night, past and present, natural and supernatural. The fact that it became the highest grossing anime movie of all time is proof that it resonates with Japanese people.

At some level, we humans live in a constant state of “in between-ness.”

We live in the midst of cycles. We wake, eat, work, play, and sleep in daily cycles. Air comes through our nose and mouth, only to be exhaled once again (continuing the cycle God started with His first breath into us). Blood circulates around our bodies through our veins. Cycles are found not just at the cellular level

Copyright 2017 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View Lutheran Mission Matters 25, no. 1 (2017) at <http://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <http://lsfm.global/joinlsfm.htm>.

E-mail [lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com) to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

but at the most foundational level of the atoms. We come from dust and “to dust [we] will return” (Gn 3:19).

A poem by Empress Jito in the eighth century expresses the beauty in the “in between” transitions and cycles.

Spring seems to have passed into summer  
See the white silk robes spread to dry  
On the Mountain of Heavenly Perfume?<sup>4</sup>

Spring seems to be over and summer seems to have come, but is it either one or neither or both? By observing summer garments being washed and prepared, the poet feels the coming of summer, though the weather is not yet hot, a masterful depiction of the ambiguity of time “in between” spring and summer.

Foundational to every dimension of Japanese culture is the importance and the subtleties of cycles in seasons. A view of history is one such example.

“Like the change of spring to summer to fall to winter, the flow of history is cyclical,”<sup>5</sup> wrote Japanese author Shuichi Kato. According to Japanese culture, history is cyclical and nations move in the midst of these cycles.

We even find this cyclical view of history in the Bible, especially in the history of Israel. Rescued from the bondage of slavery in Egypt, Israel returned to the Promised Land (after enduring forty years “in between” wandering in the desert!) only to be captured and forced into slavery again by the nation of Babylon and then other nations. Cycles of rebellion against God, repentance, and salvation repeat over and over.

Yet, through these cycles of rebellion, repentance, and redemption, the people of Israel learned dependence on God. The destructive elements in a cycle are constantly redeemed for good and made beautiful.

The Christian life is a cycle of sin, repentance, forgiveness, and renewal in the Gospel. We must rely utterly on the grace of God. Even after being saved, we fail many times. No matter how deep our understanding of the Gospel, we cannot move forward in a perfect linear path of sanctification.

We live in the “already but not yet” of God’s promises, waiting for the complete renewal and redemption of mankind. We are an “in between” people longing for everything to be made right.

We live in the “already  
but not yet”  
of God’s promises,  
waiting for the complete  
renewal and redemption  
of mankind. We are an  
“in between” people  
longing for everything  
to be made right.

The whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies (Rom 8:22–23).

The pain of the “not yet” leads us to Jesus. Jesus is the great “in between” mediator of God and man, the crux of Creation.

Jesus said, “It is finished!” but everything broken is not yet fixed. Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus and said, “My time has not yet come,” at the wedding in Cana. Jesus expressed His frustration at the brokenness of this world when He said, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . How often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings!” (Mt 23:37).

We live in Holy Saturday, between the suffering and death of Good Friday and the joy and resurrection of Easter Sunday. The cross gives immeasurable meaning to our present “groaning,” as we look ahead to the New Creation.

Amidst both healthy and destructive cycles of life, God remains the one and only “still point of the turning world.”<sup>6</sup> On earth and in heaven, we are dependent on God alone for salvation and true rest. The resurrection is proof that all God’s promises will one day be fulfilled and that He is indeed God over all time, including the time “in between.”

We live in Holy Saturday, between the suffering and death of Good Friday and the joy and resurrection of Easter Sunday. . . .

The resurrection is proof that all God’s promises will one day be fulfilled and that He is indeed God over all time, including the time “in between.”

In cycles of history and the ambiguity of time between one season and another, we can rely only on the unchanging God who “is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow” (Heb 13:8) and live in His promises.

## **Conclusion**

God is the God of the “in between.” God of the “in between” of humanity restores our relationships through love. God of the space “in between” connects us to Himself by His grace. God of the time “in between” gives us firm promises in which we trust as we live in cycles of history.

In heaven and on earth, we depend completely and eternally on God alone. Hope comes from faith alone and not by any of our actions.

The Gospel reveals itself in the language, art, and culture of every nation, tribe, and people of this world. May God continue to work through these to deepen our worship of Him.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> “Japan the Beautiful and Myself.” Yasunari Kawabata. Translated by Edward Seidensticker. (Kodansha International Ltd., 1968), 69.

<sup>2</sup> “Time and Space in Japanese Culture.” Shuichi Kato. (Iwanami Shoten, 2007), 34.

<sup>3</sup> “The Pillow Book.” Sei Shonagan. Translated by Meredith McKinney (Penguin Classics, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> “Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves” *Manyoshu* I:28.

<sup>5</sup> “Time and Space in Japanese Culture.” Shuichi Kato. (Iwanami Shoten, 2007), 34.

<sup>6</sup> “Burnt Norton” from *Four Quartets*. T. S. Eliot. 1935.