

“St. Lucia: Ready to Give”

Liturgical Date: Commemoration of St. Lucia (December 13); Part Three of Advent Series, Ready: Advent with the Saints

Primary Texts: 2 Corinthians 10:17-11:2, St. Matthew 25:1-13

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Today we continue our Advent Series called *Ready: Advent with the Saints* with St. Lucia. We have already heard about faithful Noah who had to be, and teaches us, to be ready for the judgment of God. Last Sunday we had a special visit from St. Nicholas who readied us to celebrate Christmas with the correct focus and priorities. Next Sunday we will hear about Katie Luther and the love she and Martin shared. But today, we hear of Lucia, whom the Lord required something even more than these other three in that she would need to be ready to give her very life as a martyr for Jesus. St. Lucia: Ready to Give.

As part of this sermon I want to share some about how St. Lucia is celebrated around the world. Her name varies in its pronunciation based on where you are. In England and other English speaking regions it is Lucy. In Italy she is (Santa Loo-Chee-A). In the Caribbean an island nation bears her name, she is (Saint Loosh-A). Her day on the church calendar is actually a fairly large celebration in some regions of the world such as Croatia, Hungary, regions of Italy, and Scandinavia. And nowhere is St. Lucia Day a bigger celebration than in Sweden-and thus we use their pronunciation of her name today. Thus some of musical choices today as Swedish.

Several years ago, when we observed this commemoration at Christ the King our friends, the Guvens, who are natives of Sweden came and led our celebration. My family even attended a St. Lucia celebration at the

Swedish furniture store, IKEA, with them that is held each year. They could not be with us today, primarily because of pandemic concerns, but I will attempt to do justice to explaining a little about this holiday.

If you happened to be in Sweden on December 13 you would quickly notice something big was going on. People would wake up early to greet the day's light. There would be parades. Children would be dressed in white robes. The girls would have red sashes on their robes, a crown of lingonberry branches upon their heads, and carry candles (see bulletin cover). One girl would have candles in her crown and represents Lucia. While Swedish culture is not known as overly competitive, being chosen as "Lucia" is a big deal. Towns and schools choose a "Lucia", somewhat like a "homecoming queen" in the U.S. A national Lucia is also chosen, televised across the nation, and she will perform certain official functions and visit hospitals throughout the year (think kind of "Miss America" for Sweden). And as you may know, Sweden is country where the Lutheran Church is the state church. Unfortunately, Sweden like much of northern Europe, has become very secular. However, on St. Lucia Day you would find churches packed with people as children sing in special concerts. And then of course there is food. You would be offered "Lussekatts" buns flavored with saffron and dotted with raisins. Perhaps some warm cider called "Glogg", fish dishes, lingonberries (remember the crowns), and of course those famous Swedish meatballs. This is the traditional beginning of the Christmas Season in Sweden. But who was this St. Lucia? What is the meaning of these traditions associated with her?

When you study some of the early saints, it can be hard to discern what exactly is fact and what is legend from the various sources. Of Lucia, this is what we know for sure: She died as a martyr in the persecution of

Christians under the Roman emperor Diocletian in Syracuse (Sicily, Italy) in AD 304. Based on some common traditions, we also know other things that likely happened in her life. Like many of the other saints she is remembered as a kind and generous person of devout faith in the face of opposition. As our Epistle from 2 Corinthians instructs believers, *“he who glories, let him glory in the Lord. For not he who commends himself is approved, but who the Lord commends.”* Lucia relates to the root word for “light” and this is why her commemoration is celebrated so strongly in Sweden and the Scandinavian countries. Much of traditional folklore in these regions relates to themes of light and darkness. In the winter it is dark for much of the day. St. Lucia Day is at the time of the year when the days are shortest on light. Lucia reminds them that even times of darkness, there is light. The light and glory of Christ shined through His servant Lucia. The light of Christ overcomes the darkness of sin. She certainly had “oil in her lamp” as did the wise virgins of St. Matthew 25. She was ready when the bridegroom came calling.

Lucia is said to have been born to rich parents in Sicily in 283. Her father died when she was young and her mother Eutychia raised her. Lucia was a devout follower of Jesus Christ in a land dominated by the darkness of Roman paganism. She is known for her giving-her many acts of charity towards the poor. It is said that she placed candles around her head to light her way in delivering food to Christians hiding in the catacombs. This is where the tradition of the local “Lucias” in Sweden wearing candles upon their heads comes from.

Her family’s wealth gave her many chances to give abundantly. But wealth can also come with challenges as well. She would make an attractive bride due to the large dowry that any man who would marry her would

receive. But Lucia had vowed to remain a virgin and to give away her wealth. This posed a problem as her mother had promised her in marriage to a rich pagan man. Lucia refused to marry him. A quote attributed to her in pleading with her mother to call off the marriage is, *“Whatever you give away at death for the Lord’s sake you give because you cannot take it with you. Give now to the true Savior, while you are healthy, whatever you intended to give away at your death.”* It is said that her mother gave in and called off the marriage.

But this is not the end of the story. Her betrothed was very angry, his pride injured and the fortune that he stood to attain was now no longer in the cards. So he complained to the Roman governor Pashasius. He ordered Lucia to make a sacrifice to the Roman emperor as punishment. This Lucia also refused to do as her allegiance was only to Jesus. A cruel edict was then issued by the governor: Lucia would be forced into prostitution in a brothel. But Lucia was steadfast in her desire to present herself as a chaste virgin before Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2). This is why Lucia is often depicted in a white baptismal gown, representing purity. Thus young unmarried women in Sweden dress in white robes on December 13. She never went to the brothel, despite the Romans best efforts. It is said that even oxen could not drag her away.

Enraged, the Romans next moved to execute her. Some of the sources speak of her eyes being gouged out after she said that she saw in a vision in that the governor and Roman emperor would fall from power. These sources are less reliable though, as they only appear beginning in the Middle Ages. An attempt was made to burn her to death. The wood would not burn. Lucia was executed by the sword, by most accounts, stabbed through the neck. At the tender age of 21, Lucia had stood firm in her faith against

all opposition. To her dying breath she gave all that she had to the Lord- even her very life as she knew the eternal reward that awaited her in heaven. Red is the color of blood, of the martyrs of the Church, thus the red sash donned by the young “Lucias” today.

So Lucia gave. Her life was a life of service to God and His people. She gave away her wealth rather than hoard it for herself. She would not give in to her fears for her own life, but gave it- rather than compromise her faith.

Remember that whenever we learn about and reflect on the Saints, that they should always point us to God. Yes, they did heroic deeds- but they only point to the true hero of all history. God is a giving God. The Word became flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary and was born on that first Christmas night in Bethlehem. God the Father would give His only begotten Son as the payment for the sins of the world that had rejected Him. On Calvary, the blood of Jesus flowed- pierced by nails and spear. It flowed in the greatest gift, the greatest act of love in providing atonement. Victory over death would be accomplished. I pray we are ready to once again celebrate the birth of the Christ Child. To once again reflect on the greatest gift from the greatest giver.

We receive this gift through faith and then go forth in obedience, serving where God has called us. We go forth, with the light of Christ, into the world. We go forth with our lamps, filled with oil by the Holy Spirit. When God called St. Lucia home, she was ready. She was wise unto salvation. And we know not when the bridegroom will return. As in the parable in St. Matthew 25, he came at midnight. With this midnight cry, the groom had come to claim his bride. Those with the oil in their lamps went to the wedding feast, those without oil were left out. This is the fate of those

who are not prepared, who not ready, when Jesus returns. The words of Jesus ring true, *“Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.”*

I pray that this Advent season, through hearing the Word of God, that you are prepared. Ready not only for the parties, presents, guests, decorations, and festivities that come with the Christmas season. But ready with the saints of God for that marriage feast which has no end. Ready to give, ready to receive. Ready in the forgiveness that our loving heavenly Father sent in His Son. Ready in that which is received only by the Spirit.

Come Lord Jesus, Come quickly.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.