

Advent III (RCL/B)

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

December 12-13, 2020

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

It's kind of a puzzlement how an Italian saint gained such traction with Swedish and Norwegian Lutherans. But the celebration of Santa Lucia on December 13 is near and dear to many Scandinavians (as well as to others.) Many of us remember the beautiful Advent season Saint Lucy coffee hour hosted by Lucille & Richard Adelman here at Holy Trinity. The table décor always included a barefoot doll dressed for St. Lucy Day in a pure white gown with a ruby-red sash, wearing a wreath of candles in her hair. I'll get into **why** someone would be dressed like that, but first want to share a caution I found on-line for those planning Santa Lucia celebrations of their own:

Wearing lighted candles just seems to be an invitation to disaster, so substitute lighted candles and wreath with an electric battery-operated wreath or make a bread in the shape of a ring and place candles in it.¹

(Real candles in a bread wreath still sounds pretty dicy to me....) The centuries-old tradition has been for the oldest daughter in the family to dress in this way and to deliver saffron rolls or other sweets to family members in the early morning. Yum!

This year St. Lucy Day, December 13th, falls right on the third Sunday of Advent so that's why I'm talking about her. She usually doesn't get a lot of press, but ever since she died in the very early 4th century (about 304 A.D.) at around the age of 21, she's been remembered for her love of the poor and her love of Jesus. She died as a martyr, probably during the persecution under the Emperor Diocletian, shortly before Constantine became emperor and legalized Christianity.

Lucia was Sicilian. However, her name means *light*, and the sun-loving, light-longing Nordic peoples loved celebrating her life and faith on the **shortest** day of the year according to their calendar, which was a little different than ours. In my book, that makes Lucia kin to John the Baptist, whom we celebrate on June 24th, the day after the **longest** day of the year, when hours of daylight start to decrease. Remember, it's John who said of our Lord Jesus, "He must increase but I must decrease" (John 3:30). When Jesus steps onto the stage, John the Baptist steps off into the wings. We just heard a very simple introduction to John and a very succinct job description for him, planted right at the beginning of the Fourth Gospel:

6-8 There once was a man, his name John, sent by God to point out the way to the Life-Light. He came to show everyone where to look, who to believe in. John was not himself the Light; he was there to show the way to the Light. (John 1:6-8, The Message)

We're reminded again in today's Gospel how John was always redirecting the spotlight off of himself and onto Jesus. It's he who saw Jesus in the distance one day, pointed toward Him and exclaimed to his little band of followers, "Look, **there's** the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) "Focus your attention on Him. I was only ever the warm-up act. He's the big draw, the One who **belongs** center stage."

After the Jewish religious leaders make the trek out from the metropolis of Jerusalem to the uninhabited area by the Jordan River, they ask John to present credentials. Just who **is** he? (Or who does he **think** he is?) He knows where they're headed with that, so he immediately sets them straight: "Not the Messiah!"

"Are you Elijah, then? Are you the prophet?"

"No."

"Then what **good** are you?"

*"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
'Make straight the way of the Lord,'
as the prophet Isaiah said." (John 1:23)*

John prepared the Lord's way by calling God's people to repentance: a change of heart for most, a change of lifestyle for some. Like St. Paul who once wrote we should lay aside everything that prevents us from running the race of faith with fleet feet and clean conscience, John told the people then and the Holy Spirit tells us now to eliminate any distraction, any competing interest that prevents us from hearing the Lord's voice and answering the Lord's call.

Part of the Lord's call to Lucy was love of the poor. That's one of the few things we know about her for sure. Because of that devotion Lucy became the patron saint of the working poor. The story goes that her mother survived a terrible illness. In gratitude to God Lucy gave away everything she had, including the wedding dowry that would have gone to her fiancé. His love of money was apparently greater than his love for Lucy, because he vengefully ratted her out to the local authorities as a practicing Christian, a major crime. Her punishment was being sent to a brothel. She refused to join in once she got there. There's a legend they set a fire all around her to frighten her into submission, but she stood strong and the fire didn't harm her. (Maybe that's also contributed to the association of Lucy and light.) Frustrated, the authorities finally killed her with a sword.

The white dress of the child who plays Lucy on the Feast of Santa Lucia symbolizes her virginity. The ruby-red sash reminds us that she was a martyr. The bare feet call to mind her love of the poor. In artwork Lucy is often shown holding a sword, the instrument of her death, and sometimes an oil lamp, signifying *light*. (Sometimes, though, she's depicted holding a dish with her eyes. Another legend says she plucked out her own eyes

to dissuade a suitor who complimented their beauty and wouldn't leave her alone. Because of this she is also the patron saint of anyone with eye problems.)

So, legends aside, history does bear out another point of kinship between Lucy and John the Baptist: they were both martyrs. I'm not thinking physical martyrdom is likely to be something the Lord is calling **us** to, but I **am** sure we're **all** being called to lives of ever-deepening faith, hope and love. It's inescapable that love of God translates directly into love of neighbor. In the first lesson from Isaiah we heard, "*For I the Lord love justice, I hate... wrongdoing....*" (Isaiah 61:8a) We also heard this echo of Mary's Magnificat:

*I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.* (Isaiah 61:10)

One who wears the garment of salvation, one who has received the robe of righteousness in Holy Baptism, lives a righteous life and treats other in a loving, self-sacrificing, upstanding way. Lucy's love of the poor was a greater sign of her sanctity than any legend about the lengths she went to in order to repel suitors and preserve her virginity. John charged those who came to him to change their lives once they got back home again. The upshot of their dip in the River Jordan was intended to last longer than the time it took them to dry off. It was a sign they were committing to clean up their act once they got back home. Our Baptism isn't a one-and-done dip either. Baptismal grace is an ever-flowing fountain, living water coursing from God, cleansing, renewing, refreshing, recreating, if we allow the light to scatter the shadows, to penetrate our darkness. Amen

¹"Catholic Activity: Celebrating for the Feast of St. Lucy," Catholic Culture.org.

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