

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's Lutheran Church – Kimball, NE

Tuesday aft the Third Sunday in Advent – Commemoration of St. Lucia

December 13, 2016

Text: Matthew 6:19–34; I Thessalonians 5:1–28

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dear children of light, these days are the darkest times of the year, at least in the northern hemisphere. It is not an accident that St. Lucia, whose name derives from lux, light, is commemorated when the days are the shortest and the darkness is felt all the more keenly. Festivals of light became very popular in Europe, especially northern Europe, during this time of the year. St. Lucy, a 4th century saint of Christian light, became a natural choice for commemoration. Popular art often depicts her with a crown of candles adorning her head.

What is true according to the normal pattern of the seasons is also true when one considers the spiritual condition of these dark and latter days. They are felt all the more keenly as the darkness grows. Hence the need to commemorate the saints who have gone before us. Their lives of faith and faithfulness are godly sources of encouragement as we serve the Lord Jesus.

There is not much that is known for certain about Lucy except that she lived in Sicily, was devoted to the nurture and care of the poor, and died in 304 A.D. as a Christian martyr under the persecution of the Roman Emperor Diocletian. Several legends have grown up around Lucy. According to *The Golden Legend*, one of the most widely read and influential books of the Middle Ages, Lucy and her mother Euthicia visited the shrine of St. Agatha, another Sicilian martyr who died around 251 A.D. Euthicia suffered from an incurable hemorrhage, much like the women with a 12-year flow of blood described in Luke 8. After seeing a vision of Agatha, Lucy awakens and heals her mother of her disease. Lucy convinces her mother to allow her to give away her substantial dowry to care for the poor and thus take a vow of perpetual virginity in service to Christ.

The problems arose when her betrothed, a non-Christian “stupid fellow”, learned that Lucy dispersed the dowry he expected to receive among the poor. He denounced her to the Roman consul Paschasius. Various forms of torture were attempted including her defilement by gang rape. That failed because she was miraculously fixed in her

place so that they couldn't move her; a description very reminiscent of the apostle Paul's command in Eph. 6 to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. A yoke of 1,000 oxen were used to move this steadfast maiden. That too failed. They tried defiling her sanctity by drenching her with urine to no avail. Boiling oil failed to kill the young maiden. She is reported to have said, "I have prayed for this prolongation of my martyrdom in order to free believers from the fear of suffering, and to give unbelievers time to insult me." In desperation, the consul's friends plunged a dagger into her throat. Before her death, however, she prophesied "I make known to you that peace has been restored to the Church! This very day Maximian has died, and Diocletian has been driven from the throne. And just as God has given my sister Agatha to the city of Catania as protectress, so I am given to the city of Syracuse as mediatrix."

There is much in this legend that we would find not only fanciful but objectionable. And yet, she is listed in the commemorations of saints found in our hymnal. What can we find in Lucy's martyrdom "in order that we may imitate (her) faith and good works according to our calling" (AC 21)?

Lucy serves as an example of not laying up for herself treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal. Rather, she laid up for herself treasures in heaven by her confession of faith. Lucy is reported to have said, "I wish to please Christ" when given the opportunity to renounce her Christian faith. Rather than desiring food, drink, clothing, a long and prosperous life – all the things the Gentiles seek after – Lucy sought the kingdom of God and His righteousness, having grasped the promise that all these things would be added unto her in a much more glorious resurrection.

Lucy, the young maiden of light, fixed her eyes upon Jesus. The Lord Himself taught "the eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light." Two separate legends state that Lucy's eyes were gouged out. In one of the accounts, she gouged them out herself and gave them to a suitor who admired them immensely. Upon granting him this gift, she pleaded with him to leave her alone so that she may remain solely focused upon piety to Christ and the poor. Did not Jesus say "If your eye offend you, cast it out. Better to enter eternal life maimed rather than the fires of hell whole"? The other legend says that during her tortures, the Romans gouged out her beautiful eyes but they were restored miraculously. Thus, in popular art, you often see her portrayed as holding a set of eyes upon a platter. While these

accounts cannot be verified, it remains true that she fixed her eyes upon Jesus, the author and perfecter of her most holy faith.

Can we imitate Lucy's faith and good works in our vocations as AC 21 admonishes us knowing that so much that surrounds her life is speculative legend? Indeed, I think we can. "Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night...So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober...Since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ...Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing."

Lucy knew the difficulty of claiming the name of Jesus in predominantly pagan Sicily; Agatha suffered and was brutally martyred but 50 years earlier. Do we not know the times that lay before us? All things are topsy-turvy. What was once wrong is celebrated as liberty and goodness; what was once cherished as good and wholesome is now despised as society's greatest evil. A man of Middle Eastern origins commits a violent crime in a Minnesota Mall and his religion cannot be questioned or even considered as a motivating factor in his evil deed. But a Christian husband and wife in Texas who gain some notoriety on television for fixing up houses are ridiculed and censored for the so-called crime of loving and being faithful to each other and attending a Church that teaches the Biblical truth about marriage. They must be punished and censored for such hateful, backward ideas. Need we be reminded that Christians in other countries are suffering much worse in order to know the times better?

But we do not cower in fear at these dark times. Rather, Holy Scripture calls us to sobriety, that God-given ability to remain in complete control of our passions and thoughts without excess or confusion. The virtues of faith and love, those mighty breastplates of the Lord have not lost their strength and vitality. That virtue of hope grounded in the salvation promised to us in Christ Jesus remains as sturdy and sure a helmet as it did for Lucy and all the martyred saints who have gone before us.

The Light that illumined the heart and soul of a Sicilian maiden also shines within us. Jesus, the Light of the world that no darkness can overcome. You, dear brothers in office and you dear saints of God, are children of the light, children of the day for the

light of Christ has cast out the darkness of sin, unbelief, crookedness, and deceit within your heart and soul. The blood of the Lord Jesus Christ has cleansed your whole spirit, soul, and body.

As you have opportunity, encourage one another and build one another up. Dear brothers, that is why we gather today. To encourage and build up one another. Men of God, pray and fight like men of God. Dear saints of the risen Christ, pray and stand firm as laborers in the Lord knowing that you will reap in due season. All of us are children of light walking in the Day with sobriety having been clothed with the armor of faith, hope, and love.

Will we be called to speak our testimonies before kings, magistrates, or those in high positions of authority? That is not for us to say. But like Lucy of old, we shall not be put to shame. For we find delight in the commands of the Lord which we love more than life itself. On this St. Lucia's day, be reminded, enlightened, and encouraged by "the God of peace who himself sanctifies you completely. And may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it."

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.