

## **Bring the Light**

Sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement

Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington-Normal, IL

December 21, 2014

### **Story for All Ages:**

A man is so good that the angels ask God to give him the gift of miracles. God, wiser than the angels, suggests that they go ask the man if he even wants miraculous powers. They visit the man and ask him if he wouldn't like the gift of healing by the touch of his hand, then the gift of conversion of souls, and finally the gift of supreme virtue. The good man refuses these gifts. They insist that he choose a special gift or they will choose one for him. He thinks carefully and then acquiesces: "Very well, I ask that I may do a great deal of good without ever knowing it."

The angels didn't know what to do. They thought and thought and came up with a plan. Every time the sainted man's shadow fell behind him, it would have the power to cure disease, soothe pain, and comfort sorrow. As he walked, behind him his shadow "made the arid paths green, caused withered plants to bloom, gave clear water to dried up brooks, fresh color to pale children, and joy to unhappy men and women. The man simply went about his daily life diffusing virtue as the stars diffuse light and the flowers scent, without being aware of it." Out of respect for his humility, the people never spoke to him of his miracles. Eventually, they forgot his name and simply referred to him as the "Holy Shadow."

### **Sermon:**

Today's service is dedicated to Santa Lucia, St. Lucy, Santa Lucia. She is celebrated around the world—in different traditions and in different ways—but there once was a single person, Lucia of Syracuse, whose life stands at the center of the various celebrations. Little is known about Lucia, the woman, other than that she was from Sicily and that she lived her brief life at the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Many of the qualities and myths commonly attributed to the early women martyrs of the Christian church are attached to Lucia. She is said to have become converted to Christianity on a visit to the tomb of St. Agnes where she brought her ailing mother in hopes of a miraculous cure. In various accounts, either the visitation of an angel or the caring example of Christians helping the sick influenced Lucia's conversion. Either way, her faith was so deep that she vowed to dedicate her life and her virginity to the church.

One story says that Lucia had a particularly persistent suitor who worshipped her for the beauty of her eyes. So that he would no longer want to marry her and take her away from the church, Lucia plucked out her own eyes. Another story says that a thousand men and fifty oxen could not budge her when she was required to renounce her faith or be dragged off to a brothel. Yet another says that when the Romans tried to burn her at the stake the flames refused to burn and with a soldier's spear thrust through her throat Lucia continued to preach the gospel of Christianity. These are but a few of the romantic yet gruesome stories that have become attached to the life of the woman who is still celebrated today as a model of goodness and the bearer of light.

While the stories of her life are typical of those of other early martyrs, one of the remarkable things about Lucia is that she is celebrated by Protestant churches as well as Catholic ones. This is perhaps more due to cultural than religious factors as existing pre-Christian midwinter festivals merged with the teachings of the Roman church. Like most holidays in the Christian calendar, the Feast of Santa Lucia, is a blend of ancient indigenous religion and Roman Catholicism. The exact blend is lost to the mists of time, but in Sweden, December 13 was traditionally celebrated as Lussi Night. Lussi, whose name bears a striking resemblance to Lucia, was a witch or demon, who flew through the air and occasionally slipped down chimneys to snatch up naughty children. As Christianity spread to Scandinavia, December 13 became the day dedicated to Saint Lucy rather than the demon Lussi. Add in the shift of calendar dates and the difficulty of pinpointing the Winter Solstice and Santa Lucia became associated with the return of the light. This was convenient since the root of Lucia, the Latin word *lux*, means light.

Lucia is celebrated in her native Italy, but perhaps the largest celebrations in her honor are those in Scandinavia. In Sweden, the eldest daughter rises early to dress in a white gown with a red sash and wears a crown of candles as the children present their parents with saffron-scented Lucia buns for breakfast. Modern traditions include processions in both towns and churches, always led by Lucia with her crown of glowing candles.

One story behind the crown of candles is that while Lucia was helping bring supplies to Christians hiding from Roman persecution in the catacombs she wanted both hands free so she fashioned a crown of candles to light her way. Whatever its origins, the crown has taken on many meanings. In the dark of midwinter, Lucia's crown signals the return of the light to the world. In the church, it ushers in the Christmas season signaling the return of hope. Some say the candles represent the flames of martyrdom that refused to consume her, while for others Lucia's crown is a symbol of the light that she herself spread in the world.

Having experienced the procession of adorable blond girls in white gowns led by one with a lighted crown, I find it hard not to see the crown as the moving of light and hope and joy into a dark season, both literal and metaphorical. I imagine it is one of those community roles that young Swedish girls dream of fulfilling, of being the one chosen to portray a graceful Lucia with her glowing candles, the bearer of light.

It would be good to be someone who spreads light, to be the one who brings illumination to the darkness, food to the starving, safety to those in fear of evil spirits. Far better than to be a saint set apart from the life of humanity. To be the bringer of light, or to spread goodness unknowingly like the man in the story Rosie told this morning, that would be a role I think many would want to assume, especially if it was as easy as keeping a crown on your head or letting your shadow follow you around. The martyrdom and sainthood parts are rather more problematic. That takes a special sort of person.

The figures in the stories, myths and celebrations we have inherited are those sorts of people, set apart by heroic deeds and a sort of everlasting goodness few actual humans possess. I imagine it would be rather satisfying to offer unlimited goodness simply by the passing of one's shadow, but here's the thing—you can't cast a shadow without a good source of light falling on you, not emanating from you but falling on you from another source.

The fellow in our story could not have offered anything to the world without the light of others shining on him. We are all surrounded by others who offer their light to us, who let their light shine on us like Lucia's candles. We need each other to illuminate the good that each brings, to keep the fires burning and to bring hope in the bleak midwinter. As our reading this morning assured us "No one is ever too old. No one is too young. Each of us can touch someone by our love and inspire them with our light." If we have cause to think with gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us, so too have we rekindled the spark within others.

You may feel that your lot is more shadow than light, but know that there are blessings to be found in the shadows. The gift of empathy is not given to those who have never suffered. The ability to connect with someone in need is all the deeper when you yourself have known need.

The life Lucia of Syracuse led was the stuff of tragedy. If even one of the stories told about her is true she must have known days of deep darkness, but through thousands of years of others using their own light to keep her memory alive, to recreate the good she brought to the world, her light continues to warm and inspire. One of best stories about Lucia is that she brought food to the starving villagers on the shores of Lake Vanern. This is not a deed so heroic that it takes a saint or martyr to accomplish. We can all do something to feed the hungry, to comfort those in sorrow, to accompany those with difficult roads to walk.

No one is ever too old. No one is too young. Each of us can bring the light. To bring the light is to honor the worth and dignity of another life. To bring the light is to affirm justice, equity and compassion in our relationships. To bring the light is to accept one another and encourage each other on the journey. To bring the light is to respect the interdependent web of all life.

As we approach the days of Christmas and greet a new year, let us remember all those who bring light with this poem *Charge of the Sun Gods* by Dorothy Morrison.

I am the Light that bursts through the Darkness  
 And the smile on the young child's face  
 I am the warmth that melts the winter chill  
 And the sparks that dance from the old fireplace

I am the smell of oranges and apples  
 And the scent of cinnamon, nutmeg, and clove  
 I am the holly, the ivy, the mistletoe ball,  
 And the jocularity of the Great God, Jove

I am found in the twinkling of an aged eye  
 And in the hope of children everywhere  
 Yes, joy and love and warmth am I  
 Where kindness abounds, I, too, am there

I am your brother, your father, the wise one  
 And I warm you gently in the light of my love.  
 I lighten your worries, bring good health and speed growth

By shedding my rays down on you from above

But remember, my children, be grateful  
For my brother, the Darkness, and winter's deep chill  
For without them, there would be little reason  
For this holiday season of peace and good will.

Blessed be. Que asi sea. May it be so.

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