

Legends of St. Lucia

What do Norse Vikings, Swedish farmers, an Italian peasant girl, and an English Bishop have in common? Based on the reason we are all here today, you might guess St. Lucia Day. And you would be right. The interesting story is in who and the why.

Let's start with the Norse Vikings. According to the old Julian calendar, December 13 is the darkest day. In modern times with our Gregorian calendar, we know this to be December 21st and 22nd.. the shortest day and the longest night for those of us, like the Vikings, in the Northern Hemisphere.. otherwise known as the Winter Solstice. This darkest day was not a day to be out on a boat, but rather to be inside.. possibly burning a log to keep warm, for a tradition that would later become the winter festival.. or burning of the Yule Log.

Likewise, December 13 was the day the ancient pagan Scandinavian farmers offered sacrifices for good crops for the coming summer. These sacrifices would usually involve building a ceremonial fire to light the night. The word Lucia refers to light in several languages. It is perhaps in this way that the person of St. Lucia, who we will talk about soon, became mingled with the legends of Lucia in Scandinavian countries.

There are a number of old legends of Lucia in Sweden. An old legend from the province of Dalsland, names Lucia as the bride of light. The legend says that on December 13, Lucia will appear riding in a lusse-cart, similar to a chariot, and if the cart breaks down, you will get lice in your hair. On Lucia night, the threshing of grain must be finished to insure a bountiful crop the next year, the horses should have on winter shoes, and all new-born babies should be baptized before Lucia night or the trolls would come and whisk them away forever.

Another old legend tells of Lucia being seen in the Swedish province of Vermland during a great famine. Lucia, robed in white came across Lake Venern in a large ship. She commanded the ship to dock at different places and distributed food to the starving people. The people who lived in Vermland claimed Lucia was the queen of supernatural beings and was a worker of miracles.

But these Nordic stories are more myth than fact. To understand why we celebrate St. Lucia Day today, we need to look at the actual person. An English bishop from the Seventh Century, St. Aldhelm, gave us the story of St. Lucia as we know it today. His story has not been proven to be historically correct, but his story stresses why the young maiden Lucia was a Christian honored by the early church.

Lucia was born in Syracuse, Sicily in Italy. Her mother, a widow, raised her in the Christian faith. Lucia made a vow to God never to marry and to devote her life to serving Christ and the poor. There was a young man who wanted to marry Lucia. Lucia told her mother her secret vow and asked for her inheritance which would have been her dowry. Lucia used her inheritance to help the poor and needy. The story tells of Lucia bringing food to the Christians hiding in the caves. In order to bring with her as many supplies as possible, she needed to have both hands free. She solved this problem by attaching candles to a wreath on her head. Meanwhile, the rejected young man accused her of aiding and abetting the Christians. Lucia was brought before the Roman Court and was asked to renounce her faith in Christ, but she refused. The court condemned her to die a martyr's death. Later the Church declared Lucia a saint of the Church and patron saint of the blind, as she had brought so much light to the world and yet it is believed she lost her sight during her persecution. The story of St. Lucia resonated particularly in Scandinavia where it became mingled with those earlier Norse legends we discussed. Today it is one of the very few saint days observed in Scandinavia.

So however the St. Lucia celebration came to be, the St. Lucia Day celebration is a combination of remembering old folklore traditions and honoring a saint. Put the two together, the religious and the folklore, and you create a warm and joyous day dedicated to finding of light in the darkness.

St. Lucia is not a preparation for Christmas in the same sense as Advent is. It is a reminder of St. Lucia herself and her sacrificial giving to the poor and her devotion to Christ. The life of St. Lucia and a Lucia celebration direct us to Christ – the Light of the World.

A St. Lucia celebration stresses the importance of light and the coming of light. Light as warmth, light as promise, light as hope, light as life and light shining in the darkness. The Light of Christ shining in our dark world.

Today we celebrate that light just as the Norse Vikings, Swedish farmers, an Italian peasant girl, and an English Bishop all did.

Not used in this version:

Let's begin with a little poem found in Traditional Swedish books:

Now light one thousand Christmas lights
On dark earth here tonight
One thousand, thousand also shine
To make the dark sky bright.

It is a beautiful poem that conjures up images of deep winter nights and a dark star-filled sky. It speaks to the history of St. Lucia and the light that her memory brings to the world. But who is St. Lucia and why do we celebrate her day?