

**“I am the light of the world.
Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”**

(John 8: 12)

Do you ever wonder why we celebrate Christmas on December 25? Since the early days of Christianity in the Roman Empire, the Church has sought to help people to understand the truths of Christianity through connecting them with practices in their own cultures. One such pagan Roman custom was to celebrate the birthday of the sun god at the winter solstice. In order to help these pagans understand that **with the birth of Jesus Christ, the true light of the world came to fight the darkness of sin and death**, early Christians connected the symbolic increase in sunlight (and decreasing darkness) with the birth of Jesus Christ.

John states, “[Jesus] was a burning and shining lamp, and for a while you were content to rejoice in His light.” (John 5:35) This reference to Jesus as a “burning and shining lamp” hearkens to the parable of the ten virgins waiting for the bridegroom (Matthew 25: 1-13). We are the ten virgins, and Jesus is the bridegroom, the light who came into the world with his historical birth and the bridegroom who will return at the end of time. **We watch and wait for both comings of Jesus into the world, but we must be prepared.** The five foolish virgins had brought no oil for their lamps – they were unprepared to light the way for the bridegroom when he came. While the foolish virgins went off to buy the oil, the five wise virgins, who had prepared by bringing flasks of oil in advance, were there to light the way for the bridegroom and were invited into the wedding feast - eternal life with Jesus, the Bridegroom. These five wise virgins were alert, watchful, and prepared. **How prepared are we to meet Jesus when he comes?**

The common practice of displaying Christmas lights goes back to these ideas. **We put up Christmas lights, put candles in the windows, and light luminaries on our sidewalks that lead to our homes or churches to symbolically light the way for the Christ Child as well as to anticipate the coming of the Bridegroom – Jesus – at the end of time. With the coming of Christ, the Light has succeeded in pushing away the darkness of sin.** We prepare for His coming by preparing our homes to light His way when He comes.

The practice of putting candles in windows comes from the need to identify safe Catholic homes for fugitive priests during a time of suppression of Catholicism in Ireland. Nineteenth century Irish immigrants brought this tradition to America, particularly the Beacon Hill district of Boston. Later, at the turn of the 20th century, St. Louis carolers would sing at homes identified by a candle in the window.

The custom of placing luminaries along the sidewalks and fronts of home was begun by Hispanics in the American Southwest. This tradition of placing candles in paper sacks filled with sand, also symbolically lights the way for Mary, Joseph, and the Christ Child.

In the Gospel readings of this Sunday and next, “John [the Baptist] holds the lamp by which we see Jesus as the light of the world. He does not allow himself to cast any shadow on the Good News of the coming he proclaims: he stands out of the way and draws all the attention to the promised Christ. In Christ, not in ourselves, lies the source of all our joy in this Advent season – and always!” (*Magnificat*, Vol. 16, No. 10, p. 185)