

Christmas Meditation

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson

December 24, 2023

Tomorrow, Dec. 25, marks the official start of the 12 days of Christmas. This is a period in Christian theology that marks the time between the birth of Christ and the coming of the Magi, the three wise men. It begins on Christmas Day and runs through January 6, which is Epiphany, when the three wise men arrived at the manger.

Is there anything we do to celebrate the 12 days of Christmas? Anything you can think of that's associated with it?

Yes, there's a song, isn't there? "The 12 Days of Christmas." But otherwise, things go back to normal after Dec. 25.

Now, if you want to continue in the true Christmas spirit during the actual 12 days of Christmas – and have a reason to leave your decorations up a little longer – you can use the song to help you.

Legend has it that in England during the religious wars of the 16 century – when being a Catholic could be dangerous – many people practiced their faith in secret. In doing this, they used "The 12 Days of Christmas" to secretly pass the faith onto their children.

For instance, what's the first line of the song, the lyric for the first day of Christmas? Anybody?

Right, a Partridge in a Pear Tree. A partridge in a pear tree symbolizes Jesus Christ, with the partridge representing Christ's willingness to sacrifice himself, and the pear tree symbolizing the cross.

How about the Second Day of Christmas. What's does my "true love" give me in the second verse?

That's right, two Turtle Doves. The two turtle doves represent the Old and New Testaments. This highlights the harmony and connection between the Old and New Testaments.

After all, everything in the Bible, overall, is to be read through the Advent, the coming of Jesus Christ.

And then there are the Three French Hens. The three French hens signify the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and love, or charity. As it says in 1 Corinthians 13, "... Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

OK. Next verse. What do you think the Four Calling Birds symbolize? Anybody? What are there four of in the Bible.

That's right. The four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Like Calling Birds, these four accounts of the gospel sing out with the good news of Jesus, his life and his teachings. Singing out for all to hear and bask in this beautiful call to live our lives in Christ-like fashion.

The Fifth Day of Christmas, the Five Golden Rings, represent the first five books of the Old Testament. Known as the Pentateuch or the Torah, these five books – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy – emphasize God's covenant with his people.

Then we have the Six Geese A-Laying. Six geese a-laying symbolizes the six days of creation. As you think of the miracle of life displayed by geese – or any bird giving – birth to a brood of hatchlings, let that remind you of God's generative, creative power as the creator of the world, bring forth life on this egg-shaped planet of ours.

The Seven Swans A-Swimming represent the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. In the Roman Catholic church, the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord.

The Eight Maids A-Milking symbolizes the eight Beatitudes preached by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. These are the virtues and blessings of a righteous life.

1. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
2. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
3. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
4. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
5. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.
6. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
7. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.
8. and Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

On the ninth day of Christmas, we have Nine Ladies Dancing. These represents the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Ten Lords A-Leaping signify the Ten What? What are there 10 of in the Bible? That's right. The Ten Commandments. Just like a lord who has territory put under his protection and rule, we as Christians enjoy the protection and guidance the Ten Commandments.

1. I am the Lord your God: You shall not have strange gods before me.
2. You shall not take the name of the Lord God in vain.
3. Remember to keep holy the Lord's day.
4. Honor your father and your mother.
5. You shall not kill.
6. You shall not commit adultery.
7. You shall not steal.
8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
9. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.

OK. Almost done. We just have Eleven Pipers Piping and Twelve Drummers Drumming left. The Eleven Faithful Apostles – Peter, Andrew, James the son of Zebedee, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon, and Thaddeus – these are our 11 pipers piping, spreading the gospel and gathering followers around the world.

And finally, Twelve Drummers Drumming. These, legend has it, represent the 12 points of doctrine in the Apostles' Creed, which summarizes the core beliefs of Christianity.

The Apostles' Creed: No. 1) – say it together if you can – I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth; (No. 2) and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, ...

... who (No. 3) was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, (4) suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into hell – that's all No. 4;

(No. 5) the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

(No. 6) From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. (7) I believe in the Holy Ghost, (8) the holy catholic church, (9) the communion of saints, (10) the forgiveness of sins, (11) the resurrection of the body, and (12) the life everlasting.

So, there you have it. The Twelve Days of Christmas and their biblical meaning, according to legend.¹ I'll have copies of this for you to take and consider over the next 12 days – the Twelve Days of Christmas!

Merry Christmas...

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, in the midst of all the Christmas celebration, we need to pause and remember the true meaning of this season.

The food, the wrapping paper and bows and all of the festivities are but a small part. You, who give us everything we have – even though we continually turn away from you – you blessed us with the greatest gift of all: your Son.

Rekindle hope afresh in us as we stand in awe of the Christ child. Instill in us the ability to bow before you with the trust and innocence of a small child.

May the excitement of Jesus' birth that we feel tonight and in the morning remain with us throughout the year, and may the comfort and peace he brings be upon those most need of his healing touch and nurturing care.

And for us, help us to be agents of peace on earth and examples of good will to all, as we live out our calling as followers of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

¹ <https://www.dynamiccatholic.com/advent/twelve-days-of-christmas.html>