

## THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

*After several requests, I am sharing my sermon notes from last Sunday. See the introduction below and follow the link at the bottom to see the whole piece.*

*Before beginning, it is worth noting that while the suggested history cannot be confirmed, that in no way diminishes our ability to take advantage of such an interpretation in our time for the teaching and sharing of our faith. Like any other teaching aids, such as mnemonic devices, we may utilize this song to make connections and grow in the knowledge and love of God. Likewise, as one version was shared in the Sunday sermon, alternatives that have been or could be used are provided below as well.*

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The Christmas season is the 12 days between Christmas Day and the Epiphany on January 6 (which I should note were established long before the well-known song I'm about to reference). The celebration begins with the triumphant moment on Christmas at the birth of Christ and concludes with the arrival of the Magi, or Wise Men, from the East bearing their gifts to the new born king.

In some traditions, potentially illustrated by the song in consideration, the 12 days are marked by gifts each day. In others, the gifts are withheld until the Epiphany when at the giving of the gifts of the Magi we too would receive our presents. However it works out, Christmas continues. It is not merely one day but a season for us here in the life of the church

The well-known song for the 12 days of Christmas may have a bit of history as well. It is held by some (though there is no clear evidence to support the claim) that the song itself was form of catechism or Christian teaching dating back to the time of the Reformation in England. In it, each aspect of the song corresponds with some truth or grace or gift which God shares with his people of faith.

### **On the 1st day of Christmas my true love gave to me... A Partridge in a Pear Tree**

According to our patter of understanding the song, our true love is none other than the Lord God. The partridge in a pear tree is Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, whose birthday we celebrate on December 25, the first day of Christmas.

### **On the 2nd day of Christmas my true love gave to me... Two Turtle Doves**

The Old and New Testaments, which together bear witness to God's self-revelation in history,

a witness and proclamation to the world, among whom he would come himself as the Messiah long foretold.

*(Alternatives include: Two Natures of Christ - Divine and Human)*

**On the 3rd day of Christmas my true love gave to me...  
Three French Hens**

The Three Theological Virtues: 1) Faith, 2) Hope, and 3) Love, the greatest of these being Love according to St. Paul (1 Corinthians 13:13).

*(Alternatives include: The Three Persons of the Trinity; Three Years of Jesus Ministry; Three Days in the Tomb)*

**On the 4th day of Christmas my true love gave to me...  
Four Calling Birds**

The Four Gospels: 1) Matthew, 2) Mark, 3) Luke, and 4) John, which sing the song of salvation by recounting the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of the Incarnate Son of God.

*(Alternatives include: The Cardinal (Moral) Virtues – Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance)*

**On the 5th day of Christmas my true love gave to me...  
Five Gold Rings**

The first Five Books of the Old Testament, known as the Torah or the Pentateuch: 1) Genesis, 2) Exodus, 3) Leviticus, 4) Numbers, and 5) Deuteronomy, which gives the story of creation, humanity's sinful failure, and God's response of grace, electing to redeem his fallen creation.

*(Alternatives include: The Five Wounds of Christ; The Five Books of the Psalms)*

**On the 6th day of Christmas my true love gave to me...  
Six Geese A-laying**

The six days of creation that confesses God as Creator and Sustainer of the world (Genesis 1), remembering of course that on the 7<sup>th</sup> day, God rested.

**On the 7th day of Christmas my true love gave to me...  
Seven Swans A-swimming**

Just as graceful and beautiful as swans are the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: 1) prophecy, 2) ministry, 3) teaching, 4) exhortation, 5) giving, 6) leading, and 7) compassion (Romans 12:6-8; cf. 1 Corinthians 12:8-11).

*(Alternatives include: The Sabbath; Perfection/Completion)*

**On the 8th day of Christmas my true love gave to me...  
Eight Maids A-milking**

In the humble service of a milkmaid, do we find the Christ who came not to be served but to serve, proclaiming the eight Beatitudes: 1) Blessed are the poor in spirit, 2) those who mourn, 3) the meek, 4) those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, 5) the merciful, 6) the pure in heart, 7) the peacemakers, 8) those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. (Matthew 5:3-10)

*(Alternatives include: The Resurrection – 8th Day of the week as symbol New Day of Creation)*

**On the 9th day of Christmas my true love gave to me...  
Nine Ladies Dancing**

The nine ladies dancing present the Fruit of the Holy Spirit: 1) love, 2) joy, 3) peace, 4) patience, 5) kindness, 6) generosity, 7) faithfulness, 8) gentleness, and 9) self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23)

*(Alternatives include: Choirs of Angels – Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominions, Virtues, Powers, Principalities, Archangels, Angels)*

**On the 10th day of Christmas my true love gave to me...  
Ten Lords A-leaping**

In days of old, a Lord would have maintained the law among his people, so are the Ten Commandments given to guide the people of God: 1) You shall have no other gods before me; 2) Do not make an idol; 3) Do not take God's name in vain; 4) Remember the Sabbath Day; 5) Honor your father and mother; 6) Do not murder; 7) Do not commit adultery; 8) Do not steal; 9) Do not bear false witness; 10) Do not covet. (Exodus 20:1-17)

*(Alternatives include: The Tithe – 10%)*

**On the 11th day of Christmas my true love gave to me...  
Eleven Pipers Piping**

The eleven Faithful Apostles: 1) Simon Peter, 2) Andrew, 3) James, 4) John, 5) Philip, 6) Bartholomew, 7) Matthew, 8) Thomas, 9) James bar Alphaeus, 10) Simon the Zealot, 11) Judas bar James. (Luke 6:14-16). The list does not include the twelfth disciple, Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus.

**On the 12th day of Christmas my true love gave to me...  
Twelve Drummers Drumming**

The twelve points of doctrine in the Apostles' Creed:

- 1) I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.
- 2) I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.
- 3) He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary.
- 4) He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell [the grave].
- 5) On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
- 6) He will come again to judge the living and the dead.
- 7) I believe in the Holy Spirit, 8) the holy catholic Church,
- 9) the communion of saints,
- 10) the forgiveness of sins,
- 11) the resurrection of the body,
- 12) and life everlasting.

*(Alternatives include: The 12 Tribes of Israel; The 12 Apostles (adding Matthias))*

I have great appreciation for this song and the meaning which we may find in (or impart to) it. More than that, I love that it is a reminder to us not to rush through Christmas. The temptation, as so many neighbors have already shown, is to wrap up Christmas and move on as soon as possible. We, however, are invited to slow down, to wait, to ponder the mysteries of faith which God shares with his people. Taking it day by day to reflect upon the gifts that

he has given to us, chief among them the birth of Jesus Christ which we commemorate throughout this season.

So my invitation to us is to pause each day throughout the 12 days of Christmas that we would take a chance and remember just how much we have been given. For as we look at the list of the things we have been given, we find that they are but a portion of the fullness of gifts we have received from God. We only see a fraction of what the Lord has done and is doing in each of us, the gifts which God continues to give, but also a reminder that he gives them that we may use and share them, that we may give them away to others as well.

So let us not rush through Christmas. Let us continue in the days left to enjoy the majesty of the celebration that is the birth of Jesus Christ our Lord. Let us take the time and revel in what God has done, is doing, and will do by the promises he has made and the blessing he has bestowed upon us.

Whether that is the first time you've heard it, or a reminder to those who already knew, may we continue to celebrate the many blessings we have received from God, the life of faith which he has brought to us in his Son Jesus Christ.