

The Twelve Days of Christmas

A Sunday School Presentation by
the Children and Staff of
St. George Greek Orthodox Church
Huntington, WV
Christmas, 1998

Adapted from the Book,
The Real 12 Days of Christmas,
by Helen Haidle, 1997

THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

(Children start out surrounding the church and singing a few Christmas carols...Silent Night, Away in the Manager, O Come All Ye Faithful...)

C 1 : Let's sing, "The Twelve Days of Christmas". That can be a fun song! *On the First day of Christmas....* Hey, come on, let's sing!

C 2 : Why? That's not a religious song! All it talks about are guys "leaping", girls "milking cows", "golden rings" and a silly bird up in a pear tree!

C 3: What if I told you it really was a religious song?

C 2: Yeah, right!

C 3: No, really! Okay. You know how important songs - hymns- have been to the church? People have learned and passed down a lot of teachings through song. (Think about how you learned your "A B C's".) Anyway, if you really look at The Twelve Days of Christmas you could learn a lot.

C 2 : Yeah? Like what?

C 3 : Well, in the sixteenth century, England proclaimed an official state church, and any other religious teaching was strictly forbidden. So, for the next three centuries, those who refused to join the state church developed creative ways to teach children their beliefs. One popular method was to use lyrics and song. There are many secret Christian symbols concealed in this carol. This cheerful song, about a generous benefactor who loved to give, could be freely sung without ever using God's name, because "my true love" refers to God. When you hear this song, notice how even the repetitive pattern represents a special meaning -- as the verses repeat over and over, so God's ongoing gifts and blessings continue to flow.

Let's take a new look at this familiar Christmas carol.

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who do not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth. James 1 : 17 - 18

The Twelve Days of Christmas

The First Day

On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me a partridge in a pear tree.

The first gift of this Christmas song is a partridge, a small bird similar to a quail or a grouse. The original gift of Christmas is Jesus, sent to earth from God. "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son." *John 3:16* The partridge was known as a valiant bird, willing to fight to the death in order to defend its young. This bird's readiness to die for its young made it an ancient Christian symbol of Christ. The pear tree represents the cross.

I am the good shepherd...I lay down my life for the sheep. John 10:14-15

The Second Day

On the second day of Christmas, my true love gave to me two turtledoves.

For hundreds of years, Jewish families used turtledoves as offerings to God. The gift of two turtledoves is a reminder of the sacrifice offered for Jesus by Mary and Joseph. When Jesus was forty days old, they took him to the temple in Jerusalem. They brought a sacrifice of two turtledoves as was required by the law.

Joseph and Mary took Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord...and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons." Luke 2:22, 24

The Third Day

On the third day of Christmas, my true love gave to me three French hens.

French hens were valuable poultry during the sixteenth century - only the rich could afford them. These costly birds symbolized the three valuable gifts given to Jesus by the wise men: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold was the most precious of all metals; gold, for a King. Frankincense (for God), and myrrh (for a Man who is to suffer and die) were expensive spices used as incense and for burials.

When the wise men saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child... and they bowed down and worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold and of frankincense and of myrrh. Matthew 2:10 - 11

The Fourth Day

On the fourth day of Christmas, my true love gave to me four calling birds.

The four calling birds are reminders of the four Gospel writers: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These writers of the first four books of the New Testament proclaimed the testimony of Jesus' life and teachings. Like birds calling out with loud and distinctive voices, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John spread abroad the news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. They called people to faith in Jesus as their Savior.

Jesus did many other miraculous signs...which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name. John 20: 30 - 31

The Fifth Day

On the fifth day of Christmas, my true love gave to me five golden rings.

Gold rings are among the most valuable and treasured of all gifts. The five golden rings represent the first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These books, known to the Jews as the Torah, were treated with great reverence and considered to be worth more than gold. In these books, Moses, the commonly accepted author, records the creation story and the beginning history of the people of Israel.

No prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face...for no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel. Deuteronomy 34: 10, 12

The Sixth Day

On the sixth day of Christmas, my true love gave to me six geese a-laying.

In many cultures, eggs symbolize new life. Six geese laying eggs become reminders of the six days of creation when God, by His Word, brought forth life on earth. God spoke and filled the earth with plants, birds, animals, and people during the first six days of creation, as found in chapter one of the book of Genesis.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning - the sixth day. Genesis 1:1, 31

The Seventh Day

On the seventh day of Christmas, my true love gave to me seven swans a-swimming.

Seven swans symbolize the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. Just as baby swans symbolize the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. Just as baby swans grow and change from “ugly ducklings” into beautiful and graceful birds, so do God’s children grow and change through the work of the Holy Spirit. The various gifts of the Holy Spirit are distributed for the benefit of the entire body of Christ.

We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully. Romans 12: 6 - 8

The Eighth Day

On the eighth day of Christmas, my true love gave to me eight maids a-milking.

The eight milking maidens represent eight unique teachings of Jesus sometimes called the Beatitudes. These words of Jesus, from His Sermon on the Mount, nurture and strengthen us much the way milk nourishes a child.

Blessed are the poor in spirit...Blessed are those who mourn...Blessed are the meek...Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...Blessed are the merciful...Blessed are the pure in heart...Blessed are the peacemakers...Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness. Matthew 5: 3 - 12

The Ninth Day

On the ninth day of Christmas, my true love gave to me nine ladies dancing.

The nine ladies remind us of the nine different fruits that the Holy Spirit produces in the lives of God’s children. Just as these ladies dance joyfully, so can every Christian rejoice over the life-changing fruit of the Holy Spirit. Gifts like love and joy and peace are worthy of great celebration!

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Galatians 5 : 22 - 23

The Tenth Day

On the tenth day of Christmas, my true love gave to me ten lords a-leaping.

Lords were men with authority to command people's obedience. Ten lords a-leaping symbolize God's ten basic laws, otherwise known as the Ten Commandments.

*You shall have no other gods before Me.
You shall not make and bow to any carved images.
You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
Remember the Sabbath day to keep it Holy.
Honor your father and your mother.
You shall not murder.
You shall not commit adultery.
You shall not steal.
You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
You shall not covet your neighbor's things.*

Exodus 20: 3 - 17 (paraphrase)

The Eleventh Day

On the eleventh day of Christmas, my true love gave to me eleven pipers piping.

Eleven pipers represent the eleven apostles who were chosen by Jesus and remained faithful to Him. (There were twelve before the betrayal and suicide of Judas.) Like children joyfully following a piper, these disciples followed Jesus. They also called others to follow Him. They piped an everlasting tune of great joy - the salvation message of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

These are the twelve [Jesus] appointed: Simon (to whom He gave the name Peter); James son of Zebedee and his brother John...Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Him. Mark 3 : 16 - 19

The Twelfth Day

On the twelfth day of Christmas, my true love gave to me twelve drummers drumming.

Just as drummers beat out a loud, steady rhythm for marchers to follow, so the Apostle's Creed sets forth the beliefs of those who call themselves Christians. The twelve drummers represent the twelve vital Christian beliefs as stated in the Creed.

I believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.
And in One Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages.
Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten, not created, of one essence with the Father, through Whom all things were made.
For us and for our salvation, He came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man.
He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and He suffered and was buried.
On the third day He rose according to the Scriptures.
He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. His kingdom will have no end.
And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, Who proceeds from the Father, Who together with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, Who spoke through the prophets.
In one holy, catholic and apostolic Church.
I acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
I expect the resurrection of the dead. And the life of the age to come.
Amen.

C 1 : That was really cool! But I do have *one* question. Why **twelve** days? Why not 3 or 6 or 7? With all these hidden meanings in the song, there has to be some reason the number twelve was picked. Did it have to do with the **Twelve** Disciples?

C 3 : Good explanation, but not quite the exact one. See, around 350 AD, December 25 was proclaimed as the date to commemorate Jesus' birth. January 6, called the Feast of Epiphany, was celebrated not only as the Baptism of Christ, but also as the day of the presentation of the Christ child to the wise men upon their arrival in Bethlehem. Epiphany reminds us that Jesus is the Savior for all mankind, not exclusively for the Jews.

The first mention of the twelve days of Christmas dates back to the fourth century. In 567, the Council of Tours declared the twelve days between Christmas and Epiphany to be a festive period. This is why there is no fasting between Christmas and Epiphany and why we have a variety of Christmas and New Year customs that focus on giving to others.

C 3 : So, let me get this straight. Not only is there a lot of hidden meaning in this song, it also reminds us that the celebration of Christmas is between the Feasts of the Nativity of Our Lord and Epiphany.

C 2: Gee, I guess that means we should continue the *fast* of Christmas until Christmas Day. Boy, have I learned a lot today.

C 1: Me, too. I'll never think of that song in the same way again. (*To the audience..*) Will you?