

The Hidden Meanings of the Twelve Days of Christmas

INTRODUCTION

The twelve days of Christmas! In earlier times, it was customary to celebrate Christ's birth not only on Christmas Day, but for eleven days following as well. With gifts, celebrations, and festive foods, it was a grand affair! In our worship today, we seek to capture something of the joyful spirit of the twelve days of Christmas.

We will be using the familiar carol "The Twelve Days of Christmas" and exploring the meanings behind its various symbols. This hymn was written long ago during a period of religious persecution in England and has often been referred to as a "catechism in code." May God grant us a true spirit of celebration as we worship this morning. May we give thanks for the many gifts we enjoy because Christ has been given to us by "our true love"—God. This God is a God who gives gifts: twelve in all.

INTERPRETATION 1

This hymn is a birdwatcher's delight! Of the twelve symbols, six are represented by our feathery friends: a partridge, turtle doves, French hens, calling birds, geese, and swans. The partridge represents Jesus, and the pear tree represents our world into which he was born, as well as the cross on which he died.

INTERPRETATION 2

The two turtle doves stand for the Old and New Testaments. In Jesus, we find the fulfillment of God's promises found in the Old Testament, or Hebrew Scriptures. The New Testament represents God's renewed commitment to us through Jesus, based on forgiveness and love, regardless of our failure to respond fully to God and to our fellow creation.

INTERPRETATION 3

The three French hens represent the biblical virtues of faith, hope, and love. Just as the wise ones from the East brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh, God has offered these gifts to us through the Spirit of Jesus, who awakens us to their power and the importance of nurturing them in our lives.

INTERPRETATION 4

The four calling birds stand for the four Gospel writers: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Like the shepherds who were the first to visit the Christ child and then shared the good news wherever they went, the authors of the Gospels tell us about Jesus—whose story and teachings transformed their lives.

INTERPRETATION 5

The five golden rings represent the five books of Moses, known as the Law or the Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These books communicate God's original purposes in creating the world and in calling a people to bear witness to God's healing love for a suffering world, dislodged from its divine creational intention.

INTERPRETATION 6

The six geese-a-laying stand for the six days of creation.

INTERPRETATION 7

The seven swans-a-swimming represent the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, found in Isaiah 11:2: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord.

INTERPRETATION 8

At this point, the carol shifts from the lovely birds to the scene of a celebration in the court of a noble household. We see feasting and joy, music and dancing, reminding us that the wonder of Christmas invites us to rejoice with heart and soul. The eight maids-a-milking stand for the eight Beatitudes, sometimes called the “beautiful attitudes.”

INTERPRETATION 9

The nine ladies dancing represent the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit.

INTERPRETATION 10

The ten lords-a-leaping represent the Ten Commandments.

INTERPRETATION 11

The eleven pipers stand for the eleven disciples who remained faithful followers of Jesus even after the crucifixion.

INTERPRETATION 12

Finally, the twelve drummers drumming represent the twelve tenets of the Apostles’ Creed.