



The Real Story of the Twelve Days of Christmas

A Worship Service presented by children, youth or adults.

Who would have thought there was any connection between the song “The Twelve Days of Christmas” and a Christian worship service? How could a song with supposed nonsensical words have anything to do with the birth of Jesus? But such may well be the case! Sadly, the dust of many, many Christmases has covered the original meaning of this song, a meaning that may be seated deeply in the teachings of the Christian Church. The significance of this song may carry with it some startling truths. It may include such teachings as the four Gospels, the five books of Moses, the eleven apostles, the nine fruits of the Spirit, the Ten Commandments, the eight Beatitudes, the six days of creation, and more. Once the listener discovers that the twelve days of Christmas are in no way days leading up to Christmas, but rather the twelve days between Christmas and Epiphany, the symbolism begins to take shape. **(Please understand that the real history behind this song has been lost over time. This program presents one possible explanation.)**

This service may be presented by upper elementary school and Sunday school children, youth or adult groups, or even church choir groups. It is versatile enough to assign speaking parts and Scripture passages in any number of ways. Be creative! Feel free to use the Speech Choir and other narrative parts any way you wish. The hymns chosen throughout may be changed to your liking as well. (There is no accompaniment disk with this service.)

Written by Rev. Richard Lehmann

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INTRODUCTION BY PASTOR OR SPOKESPERSON

There are many things in life that we anticipate by “counting down.” For example, we have a count down when we send a rocket ship into outer space. Students count down how many school days until summer vacation, or many brides count down how many days until their wedding day (maybe even crossing off each day on the calendar).

Because many people in the world around us aren’t aware of Christianity’s religious calendar, it’s not unusual that there are some who think that the twelve days of Christmas are a sort of count-down during the days leading up to Christmas. Nothing could be further from the truth.

We are going to consider what the twelve days of Christmas really should mean to us Christians, and as we do so, we’re going to make use of a very popular Christmas song that carries a fascinating message in what *seems* to be a lot of nonsensical wording. And what song is it? Why, you hear it everywhere: “The Twelve Days of Christmas”!

What? How does that song have anything to do with our Christian celebration of Christmas? Neither Jesus nor God is mentioned in it! Yet did you know that the original song may well have been a statement of Christian belief?

You’re right in saying that Jesus is not mentioned in it. And that would be a good reason that we don’t have it in our hymn books to sing it as one of our regular Christian hymns and carols. We don’t want any songs as declarations of our faith that leave worshippers wondering what we’re singing about. But we are going to discover an amazing but subtle and hidden proclamation that this famous Christmas song gives in its symbolic use of words which actually proclaim a marvelous message about our Christian faith. After gaining this insight, you’ll hear the song with new understanding of the wonderful truths of Christianity that it declares.

According to some, the development of this song grew out of religious upheaval and persecution in Europe in the 1500’s and 1600’s. The text is claimed to have English origins while the tune is thought to be French. How long it was sung before it was officially published, we don’t know. But it first appeared in a book entitled *Mirth without Mischief* in London in 1780.

So let’s begin our adventure into “The Twelve Days of Christmas” by first proclaiming to you that we have come together for worship in the name of the Triune God, the Living God of Scripture, who has revealed Himself to mankind as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Processional: “O Come All Ye Faithful”

EXPLANATION OF SEASONS

The twelve days of Christmas outline one of the shortest seasons in our church calendar. Our calendar begins in the Advent season which always begins four Sundays before Christmas Day. Advent serves as a special season of repentance to prepare us for Christmas.

The best way that we can prepare our hearts to receive our coming Christmas King is by truthfully repenting of our sins and praying for him to rule our hearts as our Savior and Lord. If we aren’t truly sorry for our sins against God and our neighbor, we will neither be looking for a Savior to deliver us from heaven’s curse on our sins nor will we be seeking God’s help to fight temptations.

The season of Advent has symbolic objects to help us get ready for celebrating Jesus’ coming. The Advent Wreath helps us count the passing weeks of Advent, with each candle representing some aspect of preparing for Jesus. The color royal blue on our paraments is the color for hope. The coming of Jesus is where our saving and eternal hope lies. Even more, the royal blue reminds us that our hope of salvation is in none other than the *King* of kings and the *King* of Creation—Jesus.

Some churches still use purple during Advent, also a royal color from ancient times which reminds us how those who mocked Jesus, when He suffered for our sins, cloaked Him with a purple royal robe and put a sign on His cross: “Jesus of Nazareth —*King* of the Jews.”

Song: O Come, O Come Immanuel

AN OVERVIEW OF THE 12-DAY SEASON

Once December 25th arrives, the Advent season is over. We then enter the Christmas season. This season is always 12 days long, stretching from Christmas Day up to Epiphany Day, January 6th. While we count Christmas Day as the first of the 12 days of Christmas, we don't count Epiphany Day because it starts a new church season: Epiphany!

On Epiphany Day, the Church has for centuries celebrated the coming of the Wise Men to see Baby Jesus. We don't know exactly when Jesus was born or exactly when the Wise Men came to see Him in a house, so the dates of December 25th and January 6th were gradually accepted after several centuries to celebrate these events. Some Christian traditions in various countries don't exchange Christmas gifts until January 6th, remembering the Magi's gifts to Baby Jesus.

With January 5th being the 12th and last day of the Christmas season, in time it became a special day to bid the short, 12-day Christmas season farewell. It also became the time that many Christians removed their Christmas decorations. The evening of that last day got the nickname “Twelfth Night.”

French and English celebrations of Twelfth Night included serving a “King's Cake” to recall the visit of the Magi to baby King Jesus. As Christmas Eve closed out the Advent season while anticipating the joyous Christmas season, so Twelfth Night brought a finishing touch to the Christmas Season as well as anticipation of Epiphany.

DAY 1 (Christmas Day) – A Partridge in a Pear Tree

As the song “The Twelve Days of Christmas” begins, it mentions “my true love.” Who is the truest love for any Christian? Isn't it our God? **“We love Him because He first loved us,”** Scripture reminds us (I John 4:19). Moreover, think how our God tells us: **“Love the Lord your God with *all* your heart, *all* your soul, and *all* your mind.”** (Matthew 22:37)

So, *GOD* is our “true love” as well as the One who loves us so much! God gives us all we have—far more than we can ever give back to Him! Scripture says, **“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.”** (James 1:17)

He has given us talents and abilities, a home and family, health and strength, school and work, and so much for this life. But above all, He has given us forgiveness, life, salvation and so much more for now and eternity through His great *Christmas Gift* to us: His own dear Son, Jesus our Lord!

THAT is the particular gift, then, with which the song starts out. When it states, “On the first day of Christmas [that is, December 25th] my true love gave to me a partridge in a pear tree” it's referring to Jesus and the cross.

A mother partridge will lure enemies & predators away from her nest of defenseless chicks in order to protect them. She “puts her life on the line,” even pretending to be wounded. Jesus, however, didn't just pretend He was wounded for our sins. He was willing—and did—**“lay down His life for His sheep.”** (John 10:14).

Jesus, interestingly, even used a bird picture about Himself in Matthew 23:37 when He groaned in His heart at how many people just didn't care about Him as their Savior:

Speech Choir

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem! You who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.”

The pear tree on which the partridge is found symbolizes the cross of Christ. St. Paul once used the word “tree” to describe the cross (Galatians 3:13), and Jesus once told Nicodemus:

Speech Choir

“As Moses lifted up the [bronze] snake [on a pole] in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.” (John 3:15)

Isn't that fascinating, then, that every time you sing the list of gifts backwards in “The Twelve Days of Christmas” it ends with this statement about Jesus on the cross! This is what Christmas is for! Jesus was born to die for our sins and pay our eternal penalty of hell for our salvation! Galatians 4:4-5 says:

Speech Choir

“When the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law that we might receive the full rights of sons.”

Song: What Child Is This?

DAY 2 (Dec. 26) – Two Turtle Doves

The 2nd Day of Christmas—December 26th—brings the gift of “Two Turtle Doves.” These 2 doves remind us of the two doves that Mary and Joseph had to sacrifice at the Temple when Jesus was 40 days old. Obviously, the Wise Men had not yet come to visit baby Jesus by that time because Mary & Joseph hadn't had to flee to Egypt to escape Herod's murderous threat once He learned of Jesus' birth from the Wise Men. The Gospel of Luke tells us in chapter 2:22-24:

Speech Choir

“When the time of purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph & Mary took Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord’), and to offer sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”

Jesus placed Himself under the Ceremonial Laws of the Old Testament that He, as God, had set up for His Chosen People. He did not exclude Himself from the Law.

While the two turtle doves remind us how Jesus followed the Law as our substitute, another interpretation of the two turtle doves in the song is that they represent God giving us the Old and New Testaments of Scripture. Thus, as you sing the list of gifts backward to the “partridge in the pear tree,” this 2nd gift would remind us how the saving work of Jesus on the cross is a teaching found throughout God's gift of the Bible to us, in both the Old and New Testaments.

One last item about the 2nd Day of Christmas is that in the Christian Church Year, it was established as the day to commemorate Stephen, the first Christian martyr. We learn about his faith and courage in Acts 6 and 7. His day of commemoration, December 26th, is mentioned in a favorite Christmas carol entitled “Good King Wenceslas.” The 1st verse states: *Good King Wenceslas looked out on the Feast of Stephen, when the snow lay round about, deep and crisp and even.*

We will sing an anthem that uses the tune of “Good King Wenceslas” but, instead, has the lyrics of “Gentle Mary Laid Her Child.”

Song: Gentle Mary Laid Her Child

DAY 3 (Dec. 27) – Three French Hens

The 3rd Day of Christmas, December 27th, speaks of “Three French Hens.” While the number “3” often reminds us of our Triune God, that is not the case here. Rather two meanings are connected with these three gifts.

The first meaning is that these 3 hens represent the great and precious gifts of the Holy Spirit to those who trust in Jesus as their Savior. 1 Corinthians 13 lists these three divine gifts from God as faith, hope, & love. What a blessing to receive these from God since we would be faithless, hopeless, & loveless without these!

The second meaning recalls how French hens were rather expensive during the 1600’s. In that way, the gift of three French Hens is symbolic of the three gifts which the Wise Men brought to Baby Jesus: *gold, frankincense, and myrrh*—gifts which showed the deep faith of the Wise Men!

Gold was a gift given to kings, and they saw Jesus as the King of kings. Incense was what believers, through the centuries, used in connection with their prayers to God. The rising smoke and the sweet smell are symbolic of how God hears and enjoys the fragrance of the prayers of His trusting ones. Thus, the gift of incense meant that the Wise Men saw Jesus as God!

Lastly, myrrh was often used in powder form, in Jesus’ day, to sprinkle on corpses before burial in order to retard odor. Thus, the Wise Men’s gift of myrrh showed that they knew Jesus would, somehow, be dying for their sins and the sins of the world. What marvelous gifts of faith!

Let us join in singing a beloved Christmas-Epiphany carol that reminds us of what these three gifts mean. The carol assumes that there were only three Wise Men because of the three gifts. The Bible never tells us how many Wise Men there were. But let us value the marvelous faith of these men who traveled a thousand miles to give these gifts to a Baby who hadn’t even shown Himself to the world as the Messiah! That’s how great their faith in Him was!

Song: *We Three Kings*

----- DAY 4-10 HAVE BEEN REMOVED -----

DAY 11 (Jan. 4) – Eleven Pipers Piping

January 4th—the 11th Day of Christmas—brings God’s gift of “11 pipers piping.” While we might consider a flute or clarinet as common pipes that we learn and play, think for a minute of a most popular pipe instrument heard in England—the bagpipe! You can’t ignore its piercing sound! In fact, in ancient Scotland, a core of marching bagpipe players would lead the army into battle with their ear-shattering sound sending chills into the hearts of the enemy. Bagpipes would be used for other occasions, too, like solemn processions and parades. So the bagpipe served the purpose of announcing and proclaiming, besides accompanying.

With eleven such pipers in this verse, we are reminded of the eleven original apostles who remained after Judas Iscariot had removed himself in unbelief. Jesus sent out the eleven to preach—to pipe out loud—the tremendously great news of a crucified and risen Lord and Savior to the world. And how that message has resounded to the four corners of the world so that millions, down through time, have treasured what it means to know that Jesus Christ came to this world to be their Savior from sin and sin’s curse!

This beautiful and necessary Gospel message can be seen in Luke’s rendering of the birth of Jesus:

Speech Choir

“in those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

“While they were there, the time came for the Baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped Him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

“And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.’ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests.’

“When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.’ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the Baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen Him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.”

Song: *Away in a Manger*

DAY 12 (Jan. 5) – Twelve Drummers Drumming

We now come to the last day of the Christmas season, January 5th, the 12th Day. What’s so important about drumming? Drummers set the pace! The entire band leans on the drummers’ firm and steady proclamation of the beat, especially when marching. So the 12 drummers of this stanza would have the purpose of keeping the pace and holding the group together. But what, exactly, would that mean in this song?

These 12 drummers symbolize the 12 fundamental teachings of Christianity proclaimed in the Apostles Creed of how our God gives of Himself to us to save us. In that way, these drummers would be holding God’s people firmly to the pace of these 12 fundamental and saving truths:

Number 1	The Person of God the Father
Number 2	The Person of Jesus Christ, eternal Son of the Father
Number 3	He was conceived & born,
Number 4	He suffered, was crucified, died, and buried
Number 5	He descended into hell and arose,
Number 6	He ascended to heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father,
Number 7	He will return to judge the world and end the universe as we know it.
Number 8	The person of the Holy Spirit
Number 9	The Holy Christian Church
Number 10	The forgiveness of sins
Number 11	The resurrection of our bodies on the Last Day
Number 12	Everlasting life

Thus the song ends with a summary of the Christian faith. Can you remember, now, what the gifts all represented? Remember: *My true love* who gives me the gifts is God. He has given me:

Speech Choir

12 Drummers Drumming	– The 12 essential truths in the Creed that keep Christians moving forward steadily in the faith,
11 Pipers piping	– The 11 apostles proclaiming the Gospel to the world
10 Lords a leaping	– The 10 Commandments (Exodus 20)
9 Ladies dancing	– The 9-fold “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22-23)
8 Maids a-milking	– The 8 Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-10)
7 Swans a-swimming	– The 7 gifts of the Holy Spirit (Romans 12:6-8)
6 Geese a-laying	– The 6 days of Creation (Genesis 1)
5 Five golden rings	– The 5 books of Moses
4 Calling birds	– The 4 Gospels of Scripture
3 French hens	– The 3 precious virtues (Faith, Hope, & Love) or the three

gifts of the Magi

2 Turtle doves	– The Old and New Testaments
A Partridge in a pear tree	– Jesus enduring our pain on the cross

May the song take on deeper meaning for us and remind us of the great gifts our God of saving love has given us, especially through the gift of His Son.

Song: *The Twelve Days of Christmas*

(Let us now join in singing this song from the 12th Day down. Sing just the words in bold print—the actual gifts; their meanings are provided that you may recall them.)

On the 12th Day of Christmas my True Love gave to me:

12 Drummers Drumming	(the 12 essential truths in the Creed that keep Christians moving forward steadily in the faith)
11 Pipers piping	(the 11 apostles proclaiming the Gospel to the world)
10 Lords a leaping	(The 10 Commandments--Exodus 20)
9 Ladies dancing	(The 9-fold "fruit of the Spirit" - Galatians 5:22-23)
8 Maids a-milking	(The 8 Beatitudes - Matthew 5:3-10)
7 Swans a-swimming	(The 7 gifts of the Holy Spirit – Romans 12:6-8)
6 Geese a-laying	(The 6 days of Creation – Genesis 1)
5 Five golden rings	(The 5 books of Moses)
4 Calling birds	(The 4 Gospels of Scripture)
3 French hens	(The 3 precious virtues, Faith, Hope, and Love, the three gifts of the Magi)
2 Turtle doves	(The Old and New Testaments)
And a Partridge in a pear tree	(Jesus enduring our pain on the cross)

Song: *Where You There on That Christmas Night*

The Offering, Prayer & Lord's Prayer, Benediction & Announcements

Recessional Song: Hark the Herald Angels Sing