

25 Days of Advent

Seeing Jesus Through the Eyes of the Christmas Story Characters

ADVENT DAY 25: Dec. 25 – 12 Days of Christmas to Epiphany

Devotional

After Christmas, the church calendar enters twelve days of Epiphany – from Dec. 26 to Jan. 6.

The dictionary defines an epiphany as “a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something, an intuitive grasp of reality through something (such as an event) usually simple and striking or an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure.” To have an epiphany is to say, “Aha” or “I get it now.” That is what we should experience on the other side of Christmas. For 1500 years, church traditions continued the season for 12 days. Maybe this year you could leave up the decorations for a few days past New Year’s to help remind you of Christ’s birth.

When I was growing up, my mother every year would pull out the old song lyrics and force all of us to sing the “Twelve Days of Christmas” after family dinner, assigning each of us one verse to solo throughout the song. I grew up in a family of 9 people so some of us got assigned two verses and we all chimed in on the “5 golden rings”. Then, as we grew up and got married, the tradition continued and some inlaws decided to get our mom 12 Days of Christmas goblets to put on the table for Christmas Eve family dinner. You have no idea the finagling, fighting, and outright battling that went on to find the 12th day glass! It was painful. My husband figured out early on if he volunteered to wash the dishes he got a pass on singing the Christmas carol.

Then I ran across some teaching on the song that said it had much deeper meaning. A popular story behind the tune goes back to the 16th century when Queen Elizabeth of England really went after the Catholics, persecuting them to the point that admitting you were Catholic or even suspected of being a Catholic meant torture and death. England had shifted to Protestantism over Catholicism in favor of the Anglican church. Despite the dire consequences they faced, many Catholics still held onto their beliefs, even passing them down to their children. But they couldn’t do it publicly. So, according to a popular story, English Catholics of the 16th century devised coded ways to pass on their teachings. One secret message was “The Twelve Days of Christmas.”

Another theory is that it is simply a device utilized by Christian teachers to help children understand the key tenets of their faith. The story goes that the twelve days of gifts are symbols for catechetical learning, particularly aimed at children hoping to learn their catechism, but also to serve to remind adults of the realities of the Christian faith.

And still, a third theory is that it’s simply a Christmas game – the lyrics stem from a memory game in which the leader says a verse and each of the other players repeats it. Then, the leader adds another one, requiring the players to recite it with the first one – and so on and so forth.

Or the “Twelve Days of Christmas” might be the days after Christmas up until the Epiphany.

None of these theories can be proven and some have major complications that would date it much later than the 16th century. But that doesn’t really matter. Just thinking the song had deeper meaning made it a whole lot easier to belt out those lyrics each year and I treasure those family traditions. Here are the deeper meanings:

- 2 Turtle Doves = the Old and New Testaments
- 3 French Hens = faith, hope, and charity, as the principle theological virtues
- 4 Calling Birds = the four Gospels
- 5 Golden Rings = the first five books of the Old Testament, the “Pentateuch,” which gives the history of man’s fall from grace (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, & Deuteronomy)
- 6 Geese A-laying = the six days of creation (highlighting life)
- 7 Swans A-swimming = the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, the seven sacraments
- 8 Maids A-milking = the eight beatitudes
- 9 Ladies Dancing = the nine Fruits of the Holy Spirit
- 10 Lords A-leaping = the Ten Commandments
- 11 Pipers Piping = the eleven faithful apostles
- 12 Drummers Drumming = the twelve points of doctrine in the Apostle’s Creed

And the “partridge in a pear tree”? Why, Jesus, of course. Jesus Christ is symbolically represented by a mother partridge protecting her helpless nestlings. Luke 13:34 recounts the words of Christ: “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, and you were not willing.”

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: Luke 13:34

Key Verse: “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, and you were not willing.” (Luke 13:34)

Pray: Lord, thank you for the creativity of people who come up with songs like “The Twelve Days of Christmas” to help us treasure the key tenets of our faith. May we remember what each gift signifies every time we hear that song – this year and in the years to come.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: What family traditions do you treasure – from your past as a child to those you celebrate with your nuclear family today? Let everyone tell their favorite, then talk about starting a new tradition. Consider listening (or singing along) to “The Twelve Days of Christmas” with a new understanding of what each gift means in your faith.

Activity: Consider leaving the family Christmas decorations up until Jan 6, talking each day about each verse, reading the scripture and telling what the symbolic meaning of the day would be. You can consider adding the 12 Days ornaments to your Advent Tree or your Advent Garland (one gift each day). Then have a family time to take the decorations down and store them away until next year.

- Advent Tree: select a musical note and put it on the tree [Download Ornaments](#) or [Ornament Ideas](#)
- Advent Garland: put the key verse on a paper/card, assign #25, and attach it to the garland twine [Key Verses](#)
- Advent Cards: select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., start an “after Christmas family tradition) [Family Activities](#)

Look Out – Connect with Others

If your family is still off of work/school, reach out to community organizations to see if they have any wish lists or special needs after Christmas, then volunteer as a family to help out. You'd be amazed at the drop off of volunteers and attention nonprofits get after the holidays. Consider hosting a special New Year's event at a local ministry.