

The Twelve Days of Christmas

Daily Devotional

December 25

The first day of Christmas

We usually assume that Christmas Day ends the season. But no, Christmas Day is the first day of the Christmas season. While the world and the marketplace go back to "normal" on December 26, Christians continue our celebration of the coming of Jesus Christ for 12 days. The season leads to the Day of Epiphany, the three kings' day, the day we affirm that Christ is for the whole world, Jew and Gentile, slave and free.



The twelve days have been immortalized in a familiar song. "The Twelve Days of Christmas" is thought to have been an 18th-century call and response memory game during the holidays. Others have imagined (without evidence) a religious origin for the song, suggesting a coded catechism of sorts, a memory device for remembering important aspects of Christian teaching, such as seeing Jesus Christ in the partridge in a pear tree.

It seems fruitful to consider the numbers, 1 through 12, from a biblical, faith-based perspective to discover anew who God is and who we are in him. So that's what we will do for the Twelve Days of Christmas.

Just as we celebrate "firsts," such as the first day of school or work, Scripture lifts up firsts that provide essential content for our faith. Genesis 1 tells us, "in the beginning," there was One, God. And from this One issued all of life. This One found first place in the worship of Israel, "Hear, Isra'el! Adonai our God, Adonai is one; and you are to love Adonai your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your resources" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5, *Compete Jewish Bible*). We rightly make God number 1 in our hearts and lives.

The New Testament tells us of One who "is the image of the invisible God, the one who is first over all creation" (Colossians 1:15, *Common English Bible*). He is "the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Revelation 22:13). He is the One we worship and adore this Christmas Day.

Prayer

O God, open my heart to receive your Son every new day. He is the first of creation, our faith's pioneer and perfecter. Grant me peace and purpose in living for and through him, our true love. Amen.

December 26

The second day of Christmas

There are two doves of note in Holy Scripture.

The first was sent by Noah from the ark to scout out dry land as the floodwaters abated. "The dove came back to him in the evening, grasping a torn olive leaf in its beak" (Genesis 8:11). The dove and olive branch became a symbol of hope, signifying a new beginning for creation. Since then, we extend olive branches to make peace with one another.

The second dove appeared at the baptism of Jesus.

About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you, I find happiness." (Mark 1:9-11)

When we read the two stories of the doves together, we see that one informs the other. Both stories take place over water. The descending Spirit over Jesus, like Noah's dove, brings a sign of hope—something good is about to happen! And like the olive branch, Jesus brings peace, "the peace of God that exceeds all understanding" (Philippians 4:7).

The message of the two doves is that God proposes peace with the world:

Therefore, since we have been made righteous through his faithfulness, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have access by faith into this grace in which we stand through him, and we boast in the hope of God's glory. ... This hope doesn't put us to shame, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. (Romans 5:1-2, 5)

Prayer

Loving God, thank you for the gifts of your Son and your Spirit. May all I do honor your gifts of peace. Guide me in the paths of peace that I might be an agent of your reconciliation in the world. Amen.



Three is one of four complete numbers in the top 12—3, 4, 7, and 12. More on that later. Three signifies completion, harmony, and new life; a two-legged stool needs a third to provide balance. Who could imagine two stooges, or five musketeers, or nine amigos? Three is the perfect number. Even comedians honor the law of threes—a priest, a rabbi, and a minister walk into a bar....

Threes flood the Scriptures. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Faith, hope, and love. God calls Samuel three times (1 Samuel 3:8). The magi offered three gifts to the child Jesus. God is the same, yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Our Lord was raised on the third day. Anytime we see a three in Scripture, we can know that it signifies completeness.



And so, the three-ness of God. While there is no fully developed doctrine of the Trinity in the Bible, the clues are there. Paul ends his second letter to the Corinthian church with a blessing: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Corinthians 13:13). God is revealed as three persons in one Godhead with three character traits—grace, love, and fellowship. God is complete in and of Godself, with a bent toward merciful compassion that gathers all people. God's heart can be heard in the words of Jesus—"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who were sent to you! How often I

have wanted to gather your people just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings" (Luke 13:34).

God is not a math problem. In the completeness of the Trinity, God enfolds creation in the mantle of divine embrace.

Prayer

Holy One in Three, Three in One, your internal completeness testifies to the world that peace, order, and justice are your desire. In every yesterday, today, and tomorrow, be with me, always drawing me to yourself. Amen.

Four is another complete number in the ancient mind. There are four corners of the world, four compass directions—north, south, east, and west. Four constituent elements make life possible—earth, air, water, and fire. Four speaks to the diversity that contributes to wholeness.

There are also four temperaments, imagined by ancient Greek physicians and 20th-century psychologists. The most notable contemporary version comes from the Myers Briggs Type Indicator. MBTI identifies four basic human personalities, corresponding to the following labels—the Analyst, the Diplomat, the Sentinel, and the Explorer. Interestingly, each of the four Gospels shows an affinity for the four temperaments.

Matthew is the Sentinel, the one concerned for continuity between the past and the present. Matthew takes great pains to demonstrate that Jesus' birth, life, and death were in fulfillment of the Old Testament Scripture.

Luke is the Diplomat. He opens his Gospel as a personal letter to Theophilus, who may have been a governmental official. Luke's writing about a compassionate Jesus may have been a diplomatic attempt to persuade the Romans that Jesus' followers were not the threat they thought they were.

Mark is the Explorer. His account of Jesus seems more adventurous than the other three Gospels. The story is written at breakneck speed, with the word "immediately" propelling the action.

And John is the Analyst. His Gospel has long been admired for its intellectual sophistication and philosophical approach. His original audience was mainly Gentiles raised in Greek culture.

Consider the ways each Gospel recounts the Christmas story. Matthew's story is full of angels and Joseph's dreams, reminding us of Joseph, the dreamer of old. Once the child is born, wise men, kingly Gentiles visit in fulfillment of Isaiah 60. Luke's version includes the intricate relationships between Mary and her cousin Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. Instead of wealthy magi, lowly shepherds greet the new baby. Mark includes no birth story, opting to begin with Jesus' baptism and ministry. Mark gets to the point "immediately." John doesn't have a birth story unless you consider the beginning of creation a birth. In his opening verses, John situates the birth of Jesus, the Word made flesh, as God's first Word, the Word through which everything was created.

What do we do with the four different Gospels? Celebrate their diversity and revel in the variety of God's creation and church.

Prayer

O God, give me a heart of welcome as I meditate on the diverse ways your story is told. Help me not to be afraid of differences, but to be grateful. Amen.

We rightly focus on the gifts God, our true love, has given us during this Christmastide. Among the many blessings bestowed from God's hand, grace is the most wonderful. Grace is a love bigger and more wondrous than any love you can imagine. Grace is kindness and compassion. Grace is mercy and forgiveness. Grace is Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh to live among us. He is full of grace and truth. "From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace" (John 1:16).

In Hebrew, the alphabet also served as numbers. The fifth Hebrew letter is *hey*, which signifies grace and favor. God added the hey to Abram's name to make him Abraham, and at the end of Sarai to make her Sarah. Their new names marked their gracious transformation from a childless couple to the progenitors of a mighty people.



Grace transforms us from self-centered, self-possessed, sin-soaked people into lovers of God and all of our neighbors. Grace transforms us from hoarders who fear scarcity to givers who celebrate the abundant life God grants.

And so, as we revel in the gifts our true love gives daily, we rightly turn our attention to the gifts we offer. We have been blessed to be a blessing. We have been touched by grace to make us gracious and generous.

Prayer

O God, bless me with a grateful spirit and generous heart. Transform me by your grace that all I do and all I say bring honor and glory to you. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.



Numbers were used in symbolic ways in the literature of the Mediterranean world. The number six was symbolic of "incompleteness" or "imperfection." Creation week was incomplete without the seventh day of rest; human beings were given six days to work and commanded to keep the Sabbath, the seventh day. Six days of work are incomplete without a day of rest. Finally, in an extreme case, the number 666 signifies complete imperfection, as far from God's perfection as the east is from the west.



In John 2, Jesus attends a wedding in Cana of Galilee. The centerpiece of the story is six stone jars, in which Jesus turns water to wine. New wine is created in old vessels of the Jewish purification rites, symbolizing that the old forms are given new content. The gift to the wedding guests speaks of the new wine, the gift of the Holy Spirit, always ready to be poured out to empower our lives.

Those six large stone jars stood empty, symbolizing a tradition, imperfect, waiting to be filled and transformed by the power of God. The

miracle is not a rejection of Judaism, but something new that was taking place in Judaism.

How are we like those six stone jars? In what ways is your life empty, imperfect, incomplete? The promise of the six stone jars is that God is always doing something new. What it will be or become has yet to be discerned or clearly visualized. But Scripture is clear—God heals the brokenhearted, makes straight the crooked and completes the incomplete.

Prayer

O perfect God, draw near to me with your grace. See in me the goodness you exclaimed at creation on the sixth day. Let me rest in the knowledge that you are our completion in Jesus Christ. Amen.



Of all the numbers, seven is the most perfect, appearing in Scripture hundreds of times, often to signify completion and rest. God rested from work on the seventh day of creation, the Sabbath day. It's the basis for the commandment,

Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. (Exodus 20:8-11)



Peter is commanded to forgive his neighbor 70 x 7 times (or 77 depending on the translation). Paul records seven "ones" in his letter to the church at Ephesus—"You are one body and one spirit, just as God also called you in one hope. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all, who is over all, through all, and in all" (Ephesians 4:4-6).

Why does seven carry such importance in signifying completion? Some have suggested that it's because 7 is a combination of 3 and 4. For the ancients, 3 and 4 centered a person in the universe.

There were three levels or dimensions on the vertical plane—where I am standing, above me, and below me. We see this in the description of the creation of the world. The earth is at the center with a dome that separates the water above and below. The heavens are above, and Sheol, the place of the dead, is below.

On the horizontal plane, there are four directions—front, back, left, and right; or north, south, east, and west. Three and four basically assure me that I am alive. This seven is a perfect number.

One more thing: the "yous" in Ephesians 4 are in the plural, or as we Southerners would say, "y'all." The seven ones center the church, the body of believers, and call us to live together in a way that embodies the complete unity—"there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female" (Galatians 3:28)—that God has inaugurated in Jesus Christ.

Prayer

O God, may my praise not cease with six alleluias, but seventy times seven alleluias. For you have given me reason to sing a joyful song. Amen.



If you examine several baptismal fonts, both ancient and contemporary, you will notice that many of them are octagonal in shape. They are eight-sided.

“Why eight sides?” you might be thinking. Ancient theologians imagined the eighth day of creation. They associated the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week, with the day Jesus’ body lay—resting—in the tomb. Then on the first day of a new week, the eighth day, Jesus broke the bonds of death, rising to new life, ushering in a new creation. Eight is a symbol for resurrection, new life, and

baptism into the new life Christ offers.

In the Old Testament, by the rite of circumcision, baby boys were welcomed into the covenant community on the eighth day from birth. Early Christians made the bold connection between circumcision, baptism, and resurrection:

In him, you were also *circumcised* with a circumcision not administered by human hands. The circumcision of Christ is realized in the stripping away of the whole self dominated by sin. You were buried with him through *baptism* and *raised* with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. (Colossians 2:11-12)

Eight signifies initiation. It also represents seeing with the eyes of faith. John’s Gospel tells us that Thomas was absent at Jesus’ first resurrection appearance to the disciples. Because he had not seen Jesus with his eyes, he did not believe the report of his resurrection. Then John tells us, “After *eight days* his disciples were again in a house, and Thomas was with them” (John 20:26). On this occasion, when Thomas believes at the sight of Jesus, the Lord proclaims, “Happy are those who don’t see and yet believe” (John 20:29).

The next time you’re in the sanctuary, visit the baptismal font and notice how many sides there are. Whether or not there are eight sides, give thanks for the God who welcomes you into covenant relationship and new life in Jesus Christ.

Prayer

Lord Christ, on the eighth day, you were raised to new life. Make every day the eighth day for me, granting me a new life with every new morning until I meet you in my heavenly home. Amen.



Paul lists nine fruits of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). Jesus had talked about fruit as a reflection of the tree's character (Matthew 7:17-18; Luke 6.43-44). Paul says that since people of the Spirit have a new life (Galatians 5:24), they will reflect the Spirit's character. Whereas self-centered human interest destroys fellowship, the Spirit through the nine gifts creates friendship, unity, and holiness.

I love Eugene Peterson's rendering of this passage:

[God] brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like

- affection for others [love],
- exuberance about life [joy],
- serenity [peace],
- a willingness to stick with things [patience],
- a sense of compassion in the heart [kindness], and
- a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people [goodness],
- involvement in loyal commitments [faithfulness],
- not needing to force our way in life [gentleness],
- an ability to marshal and direct our energies wisely [self-control].

The character traits listed are gifts of God's Spirit. They testify to a life lived in the freedom Christ brings. The Spirit produces all the qualities that fulfill the law's requirements: loving God and loving neighbor. We do not live under the law like slaves; we live by the Spirit as children of God.

How have you experienced the fruit of the Spirit rising up in your soul and reaching out to your neighbor? How have love, patience, kindness, and generosity led you to leave your comfort zones to lift up another? How have you noticed self-control and gentleness overwhelming your desire to force your way in life, at work and school, and with your family? Be assured that when the fruit of the Spirit erupts from within you and guides your attitudes and behavior, the Spirit of our God is at work.

Prayer

Dear God, thank you for your Spirit's gifts. Help me to pay attention to their presence in my life and to resist burying them deep inside. Give me the wisdom to recognize your work in my life. Amen.

On September 3, 1993, late-night host David Letterman welcomed radio personality Casey Kasem to read the Top Ten List. The category? “The Top Ten Numbers from One To Ten.” The list began as you might expect:

“At number 10. Ten.”

“At number 9. Nine.”

But then a wrinkle: “At number 8. Six.”

Finally, the list came to an end with Kasem announcing, “Debuting all the way up at number 1. Two!”



It’s a good thing that the Ten Commandments have already been placed in order, isn’t it? There’s no doubt that the number 1 commandment is the first one: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2-3). The other nine fall right in line, with an impeccable internal logic. The first four (Moses’ first tablet) reflect the greatest commandment—Love God with your entire being. The next six (the second tablet) enumerate what it means to love your neighbor as yourself. Together, the ten are instructive for those hoping to live faithfully in covenant relationship with God.

Too often we forget that the commandments are a gift to us. Like young Martin Luther, we can assume that God’s purpose in giving the law is punitive, waiting for us to fail—and fail we will! After studying Romans, the older Luther confessed that the commandments were indeed a gift, a blessing. They aren’t a means to earning God’s favor; they are indicative of how to live with the God who has already committed himself to us.

Ten reminds us that God has given us a roadmap for living in this world. If the Ten Commandments are a roadmap, then the Spirit and her fruit is our GPS.

Prayer

Loving God, confirm in me your loving purpose. Help me know that I meet you on every path and around every corner. Guide me by your Holy Word and your Holy Spirit. Amen.

There are two stories in Scripture that feature the number eleven, and both signify loss and grief. In Genesis, Jacob's favorite son Joseph is sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. His eleven brothers. Only after the brothers had been reunited did Jacob find comfort in the presence of his twelve sons. The twelve would become progenitors of the tribes of Israel.

In the Gospels, after Judas betrayed Jesus, he hanged himself, leaving eleven disciples. After the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the disciples selected Matthias to replace Judas as the twelfth disciple. Order restored, the disciples became apostles and were sent into all the world to continue the ministry of Jesus.

Christmas can be a poignant time for those who have lost loved ones. The empty chair at the holiday table reminds us that our beloved is never coming back. Order will never be restored. The holidays twist the knife one more time.

Our son died in 2018, succumbing to cancer after a 10-year struggle. His spirit has infiltrated my muscle memory, such that I feel the grief on certain days before I realize it's the anniversary of a smile, an "I love you," or the last time I saw him.

In this season of giving, I cannot say that I've found any gift in the loss of our son. There has been no silver lining. And it never helps to have a well-meaning soul try to assure me that God needed David in heaven. What does help is the person willing to sit with me while I cry and not try to fix me. After all, that's what Jesus did when faced with the loss of a friend—Jesus wept!

Prayer

O God, be with me in my grief while the world celebrates with joy. Help me to have hope in the promise of your restoration. In Jesus' name. Amen.



You'll remember that 7 is a product of 3 and 4, the reason some suggest that 7 conveys perfection.

Guess what? Twelve is also a product of 3 and 4. Amazing, isn't it?

Twelves resound throughout Scripture. There were twelve tribes of Israel and twelve apostles. Jesus spoke in the Temple at the age of 12. At the feeding of the 5000, the disciples collected twelve baskets of leftovers.



In the Revelation, there are twelve foundations in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:14), with twelve gates and twelve angels at the gates (Rev. 21:12) and twelve pearls at the gates (Rev. 21:21). The city is foursquare at 12,000 furlongs (Rev. 21:16). The wall is 144 cubits high (Rev. 21:17), which is 12 x 12. The tree of life will bear 12 fruits. The Revelation testifies to 144,000 servants of God (12,000 each from twelve different Israelite tribes).

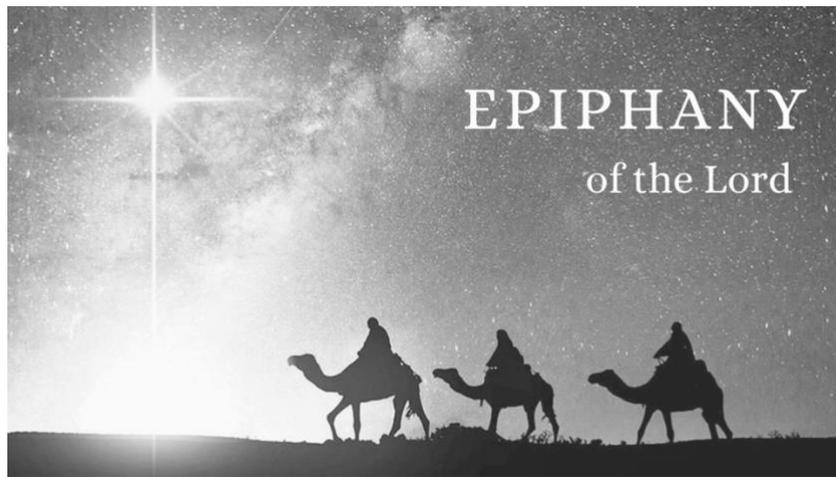
Twelve marks completion, God's will and work have been accomplished. So we close the season of Christmas on the twelfth day, marking with joy and gratitude the gift of Jesus Christ to our world.

Tomorrow, on January 6, we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany, a celebration of the Gospel going into all the world. The Gentile magi with their gifts represent the whole world coming to worship the Son of God, the Prince of Peace.

How will you carry the 12 Days of Christmas into next week, next month, and throughout the year? What gifts have you kept close to your heart with a pledge to share them with others? May your new year be bright as you seek to serve Jesus Christ.

Prayer

O God, I bless you for the gift of time that affords me an opportunity to know you and love you. Be my guide in this new year, that whatever I do might bring honor and glory to you through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



The Visit of the Wise Men

Matthew 2:1-12, NRSV

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Prayer

May Christ’s brightness illumine my life and summon us all to walk as one in your light. Amen.