

“THE GREAT BIG BOOK OF CHRISTMAS (#4):
PARTRIDGE IN A PEAR TREE”

(Hebrews 10:5-14)

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-I-

1. [Traditional Service ONLY:] Read Text: Hebrews 10:5-14 and Pray.
2. For the past four weeks we’ve been sharing in an Advent series called The Great Big Book of Christmas in which I’ve been inviting us to pretend like we’re little children again...

A–...By experiencing some of the secular stories, poems, and songs of the holidays, but then also connecting them to the true story and meaning of Christmas from the Bible.

B–So as we wrap up this series today, I want us to begin by exploring the origins of a fun, whimsical song known simply as “*The Twelve Days of Christmas*,” and then connecting it to Christian faith.
3. There are actually a number of accounts about the origins of this song, but the most common says it came from a 13th century French children’s game called “*Forfeits*”...

A–...In which you went around the room singing, with each child adding a new “gift” for each “day” (of which there could be an endless number), but also having to recite all the previous days’ gifts – and if they forgot one, then they had to give a “forfeit” (a small gift to another child).

B–Now, it may have originated as a harmless, non-sense children’s game, but by the 17th-century, it had taken on an even more important role:

C–You may already know that in that time in England it was illegal to practice (or even talk about) the Roman Catholic faith.
4. And so, “underground” English Roman Catholics took this song and adapted it for use as a catechism song, to teach their children about their beliefs.

A–Each phrase had a double meaning: a secular surface meaning that was just plain fun; but also a “secret” spiritual meaning, as well:
 - 1–For example, in the spiritual interpretation, the “*12 days*” of the song have nothing to do with *preparing for* Christmas (like we think of today), but instead refer to the 12 days of the *liturgical season* of “Christmas,” which Roman Catholics celebrated from December 25th to January 6th.
 - 2–Also, the “*True Love*” of each verse was a metaphor for God our heavenly Father, who is the giver of all good gifts. ¹

B—And then, each “gift” in the song was a metaphor/symbol for an important piece of Roman Catholic practice (and in many cases, of Christian faith in general). Specifically,...

- “12 Drummers Drumming” = 12 Points of doctrine in the Apostles' Creed.
- “11 Pipers Piping” = the eleven faithful Disciples (the 12 minus Judas Iscariot)
- “10 Lords A-leaping” = just as England was ruled by the laws of the King and His “lords”, so these = the Ten Commandments, the “laws” of God’s people
- “9 Ladies Dancing” = the nine fruit of the Holy Spirit from Galatians 5 ²
- “8 Maids A-Milking” = the eight Beatitudes of Jesus from Matthew 5
- “7 Swans A-Swimming” = the 7 Sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church ³
- “6 Geese A-Laying” = the six days of Creation described in Genesis 1
- “5 Golden Rings” = the first five books of the Bible (the “Pentateuch”)
- “4 Calling Birds” = the four gospel writers of the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) who shared / “called out” Jesus' story through their writings
- “3 French Hens” = the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love ⁴
- “2 Turtle Doves” = the Old and New Testaments ⁵

C—But by far the most important day and “gift” of all (the one that gets repeated more than than any other) is the gift given the *first* day of Christmas: “A Partridge In A Pear Tree.”

1—Now, even today partridges are known to sometimes pretend to be injured in order to draw predators away from their young – essentially *sacrificing* themselves for the sake of their children.

2—And in medieval times, a “partridge sitting in a pear tree” was a hunting symbol – a symbol for prey that was easy to catch because it was sacrificing *itself* for others.

3—Do you see where I’m going with this? Who was it in the Bible that (like a partridge) sacrificed Himself on a “tree” to protect *us* (His children)? ...Jesus, of course.

D—So, not only for 17th-century Roman Catholics, but I would argue also for us *today*, the “partridge in a pear tree” represents Jesus Christ, the greatest sacrifice and gift given to each of us by God, our “true love.” ⁶

–II–

5. Well interestingly enough, today’s scripture from Hebrews 10 is all about *sacrifice*, as well [Contemp. Service ONLY... Let me read it for us... (Read Hebrews 10:5-14 from THE MESSAGE)].

A—Here we find a letter written to Christians who’d recently converted from Judaism, and who were experiencing a nostalgic “pull” back to the sacrificial rituals of their old faith.

B—And in contrast to that “pull,” the writer here is arguing for the sufficiency of the sacrifice of *Christ* – that these converts don’t need to return to their old rituals in order to receive God’s grace and mercy, but merely to ACCEPT the one who (as Vs. 5 says) “*came into the world*” at Christmas to be a once-for-all sacrifice on their behalf.

6. You know, in our lives today, most of us don't experience a "pull" or lure back to a previous religion or belief system.

A—But many of us *do* have worldly things that tempt and lure us away from our commitments to God – that lure us *away* from practicing the sufficiency of Christ *alone* in our lives.

B—It could be a need for us to "fit in," to be liked, an addiction like alcohol, drugs, pornography, gambling, or overeating, or a pride that comes from selfishness and self-sufficiency, thinking we can make it on our own without help from anyone else

C—Well, whatever the lure is, as he did 2000 ago, I think the writer of Hebrews would want to say to us today: "*Christ alone can be sufficient for you. You don't need anything else to make it in life. So, ACCEPT His sacrifice for you.*"

7. You see, we may intellectually understand *about* Jesus, and even rationally comprehend the *reason* for his coming at Christmas (e.g., so He could grow up and one day offer Himself on our behalf, just as a partridge offers itself for *its* young).

A—But intellectually knowing *about* these things is different from ACCEPTING and practicing them in our everyday lives.

B—One Bible interpreter of Hebrews 10 says it this way, "*This [scripture] tells us that the coming of Christ means that God has laid an ultimate claim on our lives. All other worldly standards have been relativized, marginalized, and even undone. [It] tells us that Christ calls us and enables us to live our lives daringly for God.*" ⁷

C—So let me ask: Are you living "daringly" for God today?

1—Are you living your life in such a way that it reflects your acceptance of that greatest gift from your "true love" (God)?

2—And are you allowing that gift (the gift of Jesus) – first given at Christmas TO us, & then given later on the cross FOR us – to be *sufficient* for all your needs?

C—If so, then you understand that Christmas is about the birth of God's full and perfect sacrifice for you & for me – a sacrifice we need merely *accept* in order to take part in. ⁸

–III–

8. So my hope and prayer is that whenever you sing "The Twelve Days of Christmas," you'll remember God's many gifts to you and me.

A—But most importantly, when you sing about the "*the partridge in a pear tree*," you'll immediately think of Jesus, who as our "true love's" *greatest* gift, sacrificed himself so that we could have life.

B—And all we have to do is ACCEPT Him!

9. [PRAYER... *Invite congregants to receive the sacrificial gift of Jesus in their hearts & lives...*]
10. [CONGREGATIONAL SING-ALONG: “*The Twelve Days of Christmas*”; Include slips of paper in the bulletins assigning days (1-12) to groups of congregation to sing at appropriate point]

ENDNOTES:

1. Read Matthew 7:11 and Luke 11:13.
2. Read Galatians 5:22-23.
3. Roman Catholicism’s seven sacraments: Baptism; Eucharist; Marriage; Last Rites; Confession; Confirmation; and Ordination. Alternatively, the “seven swans” have also sometimes represented the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit from Romans 12:6-8.
4. E.G., the three things that in 1 Corinthians 13:13 St. Paul say “abide” always. The “three” is also sometimes thought to represent either the Holy Trinity or the gifts of the Magi/Wise Men.
5. Also symbolic of the two turtle doves offered by Mary and Joseph as a sacrifice in the Jerusalem Temple when Jesus was young.
6. Find out more about the origins of the song “Twelve Days of Christmas,” at the following websites: www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/Notes_On_Carols/twelve_days_of_christmas.htm; and www.cin.org/twelvday.html.
7. Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C, Advent/Christmas/Epiphany (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), pp. 56-57.
8. As one commentary explains it, “*Today’s text links the incarnation [e.g., birth] of Jesus with his atoning death. We know how the story ends. And so did the Gospel writers. After all, they wrote the gospels from the Passion backwards. “It was the ending that enabled them to make sense of the beginning.... He death provides the vantage point from which to view the work of Christ in both directions – backward to his birth and forward to his coming again”* [Fred Craddock, John Hayes, Carl Holladay, Gene Tucker, Preaching the New Common Lectionary: Year C, Advent, Christmas Epiphany (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), p. 45].