

December 31, 2025



PASTORAL MEDITATION Reverend Thomas Hawkins

The Twelve Days of Christmas

I went into CVS the day after Christmas and employees were removing Christmas items from shelves and discounting unsold boxes of Christmas chocolates. In their places, stockers were stacking packages of Valentine's Day sweets. Christmas usually ends when the sun sets on Christmas Day. The next day we pack Christmas away and move on with whatever is next on our calendar. Christmas seems to arrive in late September and end after the dinner table is cleared on Christmas night. What takes months and months to prepare for, to anticipate, to wait expectantly for is over in the blink of an eye.

This cultural celebration of Christmas has grown increasingly out-of-sync with the church's Christmas calendar. In an earlier time, Christmas did not begin until December 25th and then continued for 12 days until January 6, which is Epiphany or Three Kings Day. My grandmother, who was born in 1906, remembered how as a child the Christmas tree and decorations did not appear until she along with her brothers and sisters crept down the steps on Christmas morning. The gift of Christmas was a home magically transformed overnight from its drab everydayness into a space filled with wonder. Her parents told her that, when he came on Christmas Eve, Father Christmas brought the tree and decorations with him along with a few modest presents.

There's a reason for the church's prolonged celebration of Christmas. To celebrate a Christmas that is anything less than 12 days is to upstage some of the more important characters in the whole story of the Incarnation. Like the Magi, King Herod, and Joseph's flight with Mary and the Christ Child to Egypt. When we sing "On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me a partridge in a pear tree" and then proceed verse by verse until we conclude with "twelve drummers drumming," we are echoing this older tradition in which the celebration of Christmas did not end on Christmas night but continued another 12 days until January 6.

No one knows for certain where or when the carol "The Twelve Days of Christmas" originated. Some musicologists suggest it began as a Christmas season "memory-and-forfeits" game. If you couldn't hold all the days and gifts in your memory or you scrambled the sequence in which they were sung, then you had to pay a forfeit. Maybe a candy or a coin. Or perhaps a round of drinks for your fellow holiday-makers. Others suggest there is a hidden catechism of Christian beliefs that the song teaches. Christ on the cross becomes the partridge in a pear tree. The five gold rings represent the five books of the Torah. The eight maids milking symbolize the eight beatitudes. This may be a great way to use the song to teach basic Christian beliefs. But it's highly unlikely that this interpretation explains the song's origins. I prefer the amusing "memory-and-forfeits" game played around the household hearth between December 25 and January 6.

One interesting feature of "The Twelve Days of Christmas" is the prominence of animals and birds. Some of these verses, however, make no sense. What, after all, is a "calling bird?" Scholars suggest that this is a corruption what was originally a "colly" bird. In parts of England long ago, "colly" meant "black." So the verse is actually referring to four "black birds." We see the same term used in the name of a black dog that shepherds use to herd sheep. We call this dog a border "collie" without realizing "collie" originally described the color of its fur.

The song "The Twelve Days of Christmas" reminds us that Christmas is about more than Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. With its frequent references to birds and animals, Epiphany teaches us that our furry and feathered fellow-creatures need extra care in winter's bitter cold. After all, they too were gathered around the manger when Christ was born. The 12 days between Christmas Day and Epiphany Day end with the visit of the Magi, teaching us that faith is a journey on which we sometimes arrive at destinations other than those to which we imagined we would be travelling. And, when the Magi find themselves confused about where to go, it's the scriptures explained by Jerusalem's scribes as much as a star in the sky that directs them to Bethlehem.

The twelve days of Christmas end with the Magi returning to their countries by another route. The same is true for us. We can't re-live 2025. We can never go back "the same way we came" when it comes to the unspooling of our years. As we cross the threshold into a new year, we will be walking through 2026 "by another route" than the one we walked last year. The sum of all the gifts given in "The Twelve Days of Christmas" from partridges to drummers drumming adds up to 364 gifts. Is it an accident that the days in a year are almost identical to the gifts in the song? I think not. This ancient, mysterious Epiphany carol announces to us that each day of 2026 is a gift we are being given to treasure and to live wisely, joyously, and faithfully.

Happy Three Kings Day !
Pastor Thomas

SUNDAY WORSHIP in the sanctuary or livestream link: <http://www.facebook.com/churchontherotary/>

UPDATE ON MASKS

There is an uptick in cases of respiratory illnesses reported both by hospitals and in the media. In light of the increased cases of respiratory illness we encourage those attending worship with chronic conditions or heightened risk of infection to consider masking for worship. For all of us, if we have a fever or other flu-like symptoms or have had the flu within the last 7-10 days, to consider participating in worship online rather than in person or to wear a mask. We have masks available in the sanctuary near the small tables where you find the bulletins.

ALTAR FLOWERS

We invite you to provide beautiful flowers for our church altar on Sunday morning. The following dates are open: February 8th and 22nd and all of March. To reserve dates please look at the Flower Calendar sign up poster in Fellowship Hall or call the church office with any questions (525-4121).
Thank you so much, The Flower Committee

PUB THEOLOGY

Please join us this Tuesday night, January 6. Meet in the back upper parking lot at 6. Open to suggestions and trying new places. We will discuss as people arrive. Hope to see you there!

KEEPING CHILDREN WARM

What child doesn't lose a hat or a pair of mittens **at least once** during the cold winter? Please help us fill the basket in the breezeway with new or gently used hats, gloves, mittens and scarves for the children at Kensington School to keep them warm...because we care. Neighbors helping neighbors in need, it's what we do so well. Thank you so much!

HOW ABOUT DOING A PUZZLE???

It's that "indoor" time of year when the nights are VERY long. In my need to keep busy, I started doing puzzles, especially in the cold winter months! I find this activity to be quite relaxing and some even say it's good for your brain, too.

Several are currently on the shelves in the breezeway. Just take one home and when you are done, put it back or pass it along so someone else can do it. Enjoy!!!

LOAVES AND FISHES on December 27

As always, we buy enough ingredients and prepare enough entree and dessert to serve about 100 people. In recent years, and depending on the weather, we usually welcome about 85 guests. This past Saturday we sadly served only about 45 people. We worried that a lot of people would go hungry. BUT after speaking to the person in charge, we were happy to learn that until February another church in downtown Springfield is offering not only a meal but also shelter for the night. Grateful that these churches, who with the support of many other organizations, are showing such great care and concern for our neighbors in need.

THANK YOU NOTE

Gift Card Christmas Tree

Once again, we asked you to purchase gift cards in any amount and from stores of your choice and to tuck them into the tree in the sanctuary. Because you are always so generous and caring we delivered 28 cards to our Senior Center where they will be distributed now and throughout the year to families in need right here in our community. It's a wonderful thing!

PRAYER CONCERNS

PRAYER

Eternal and Ever-Living God: By the light of a star you guided the Magi to Bethlehem's manger. As we step across the threshold of a new year, guide us through its 365 days by the light of your Word and Wisdom. Inspire us to treasure each day as a gift. To see time not as a thief but as a gift, not a burden to endure but an opportunity to serve your purposes of healing and wholeness in our world. Amen.



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