

“The Twelve Days of Christmas”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
for the First Sunday After Christmas, December 31, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.
Scripture Readings: John 1:4, 5, 14; Matthew 2:13-18; and Luke 2:25-35
(Sermon by the Rev. Catherine Somerville)

Happy Christmas to all of you. A long time ago, I did a service about the twelve days of Christmas, which is the time that we are right in the middle of now. Today is the seventh day of Christmas. I came across the book recently that I used to design that service, and I decided to share it with you, because it turned out to be one of my favourite services ever.

All of you know that really irritating song, The Twelve Days of Christmas. Actually the song is speaking about this special time of the church year. It turns out that each day of the twelve days of Christmas is a particular festival, and it has a lot more to do with church than we realize. It’s a lot more than five golden rings and ten lords a-leaping.

The season actually has its roots in the time before Christianity. The Romans would gather to observe the birth of the sun at the time of the winter solstice. They lit candles and exchanged gifts of cheerfulness and goodwill. Christians simply adopted this period, around the birth of Jesus, to celebrate the light of God coming into the world. Each of the twelve days following Christmas has a history, a tradition associated with it, and a story.

We start with December 25, Christmas Day. It is also known as the Festival of the Incarnation. The scripture reading for Christmas Day details the love of God breathing life into creation. The incarnation is about God living in the world.

From the first verses of John’s gospel we hear, “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:4, 5, 14)

December 26 is the second day of Christmas. On this day, the Spirit of Christmas is seen in the world. In the Middle Ages, poor boxes were set out in churches, and congregation members were invited to share their bounty. On the Feast of Stephen, people are invited to offer acts of kindness towards their neighbours. St. Stephen lived in the first century, and he was particularly known for caring for widows and orphans. During the time of King Wenceslas in the tenth century, Christmas boxes were given out containing food, fuel and drink. The feast of Stephen is a day for helping out a local charity, for it calls us to bring the joy and love of Christmas, from our homes to a waiting and hungering world.

This is a poem about the day by Ruth Sawyer.

Hearken all ye, ‘tis the feast of Saint Stephen,
Mind that ye keep it this holy even.
Open your door and greet ye the stranger,
For ye mind that the wee Lord had naught by a manger.
Feed ye the hungry, and rest ye the weary,
This ye must do for the sake of Our Mary,
‘Tis well that ye mind, ye who sit by the fire,
That the Lord he was born in a dark and cold byre.

(ALL SING)

“Good King Wenceslas looked out on the feast of Stephen,
When the snow lay round about, deep, and crisp, and even.
Brightly shone the moon that night, though the frost was cruel
When a poor man came in sight, gathering winter fuel.”

The feast of Stephen calls us to bring the joy and love of Christmas beyond the walls of our homes, and we look for chances to be God-bearers to all parts of creation.

The third day of Christmas is kept for St. John. Like St. Stephen, John gave his life for Christ. He was part of the inner circle of the disciples. He had witnessed Jesus’ transfiguration, the healings, and the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. John stood with the women at the foot of the cross and he was given care of Mary, the mother of Jesus, after her son died. Following the resurrection, John traveled through Asia Minor preaching the gospel. He was accused of subverting the state religion of Rome, and he was sentenced to boil in a cauldron of oil. He escaped unharmed. Another time, he was offered poisoned wine to drink. He drank it but did not die. At the feast of St. John, we are told to raise our glasses and drink to the love of St. John. In the middle ages, people would bring wine to church to be blessed. They would then take the blessed wine home to be added to each barrel in their cellars. “To the love of St. John.”

December 28 marks a day as gloomy as a winter night. This day we remember the death of the innocent children, ordered by King Herod as he attempted to kill the newborn Saviour.

Reading: Matthew 2: 13-18

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son.’

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

‘A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.’

Those in power in our world continue to slaughter the innocent. We think of Syria, Myanmar, the Middle East, the many species of animals, birds and plants that face extinction. On the fourth day of Christmas, we remember that God did not come to conquer the world. Instead, God comes with forgiveness and new life. Today, we remember in our prayers those who suffer and the sins we commit, often unwittingly, that do not ease the suffering of others. In our prayers we can ask God to help us mend broken relationships, and we can do as Jesus instructed, when he said, “Go and sin no more.” December 28 reminds us to walk as people of light amidst the shadows of the day.

December 29 is the feast of Simeon. Simeon was a holy man who waited his entire life for the Saviour to come, so that he could rest in peace. Jesus' birth brought freedom, and marked a new relationship between God and the world.

Reading: Luke 2: 25-35

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

Hymn: VU #903, The Song of Simeon. This is a song usually sung at the close of the day. As the night comes, Simeon's proclamation of light is a beacon of hope to carry us through the darkness.

On December 30, we are invited to remember the women of Christmas. There is Mary, the mother of Jesus, Elizabeth, her cousin who bore John, and Anna the prophetess.

Today, we recognize the role of women in giving life to the world. We are the keepers of life, hope and faith. Whatever path a woman chooses to follow, her calling is to bring Christ-light to the world. On the sixth day of Christmas we each are invited to look for ways to bring new life to tired relationships and laughter to those who are weary and discouraged. On this day, we are invited to remember our mothers and the people who nurture and grow our spirits.

December 31, today, is called the Feast of the Holy Family. We remember how God placed God's child in the hands of a carpenter and a young woman. In joining a family, God became part of the human community. God became a member of our family.

In France, there is a tradition on this day that the father makes the sign of the cross on the foreheads of his wife and children. He asks for God's blessing on his family for the coming year. On the seventh day of Christmas, we give thanks for family, our family and the holy family, and we remember the coming of Jesus, that is cause for joy among us.

January 1 commemorates the naming of Jesus. A person's name expresses their essential character. When a child is named, there is always great excitement. The name might come from a book, or it may be given to honour a relative or a famous person.

The church festival for January 1 is known as the Naming of Jesus, and it dates back to the sixth century. Jesus was given a name that carried the promise of salvation, “Immanuel, God with us.” Jesus means “He who saves.” This year, why not try something new instead of making the usual New Year’s resolution. Look up what your name means, and then choose a positive quality in the meaning of your name and decide how you will grow into that quality in the new year. I brought a couple of name books with me, so after the service, you can come and look up the meaning of your name, and figure out how you are going to live your name to its fullest this year.

January 2 is a day for legends, like the Legend of St. Nicholas, who was Bishop of a small town in Turkey. Known for his kindness and generosity, he saved three daughters from being sold into slavery by leaving their father three bags of gold with which to buy their freedom. Today, Nicholas is known as the patron of the poor and the weak, and the saint of children.

There are many legends surrounding the keeping of Christmas. The evergreen tree, the holly, the meals, all these legends help make the story of divine love more real for us. On the ninth day of Christmas, we celebrate the telling of God’s story.

January 3 represents sacred ground. Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Rome, Lourdes, a beloved church sanctuary – any place where the word of God becomes real for you. They are places to pray, and sing, and keep silence, and listen to the stories of all the times God meets us in word and deed. They are places where we can dwell in the quiet peace of the Spirit. On January 3, the tenth day of Christmas, you are invited to name your own sacred space, be it a room in your house, or your special chair. My sacred place is a birch forest, a twenty minute walk from our house, and right in the middle of these trees, someone has built a simple wooden bench. Obviously, I am not the first person to claim this as my sacred space.

January 4 is the day to sing of resounding joy. Our songs give witness to the majesty and wonder of God. Today, we are invited to give praise to God through music. Psalm 98 tells us how:

Sing for joy to the Lord, all the earth,
Praise him with songs and shouts of joy.
Play music on the horns, and shout for joy to the Lord, Our King.

Doris Schaper is a Mennonite writer. She says that music gives us a sense of connection to the deepest parts of our lives. Music solves our double bind of needing to rest and needing to work at the same time. Sometimes we can do both. Even if we cannot solve the bind by both working and resting at the same time, music can dissolve the conflict and tension we experience. Music lets us see how nested and held and contained we are; it shows us how our lives connect with other lives. Music resembles Sabbath in the way that it separates from regular time. It brings us to time set aside for God.

She goes on to say that she thinks more people worship in church because of the music than for anything else. Even when the sermon misses the point, we can find God in singing.

The blessing of the waters is marked on January 5. Today, the reading is about the time Jesus was baptized in the waters of the Jordan. Churches in the Eastern Tradition of Christianity observe this time for blessing water.

On January 5, the last day of the Christmas season, we remember how God uses ordinary means, like water, to bring forth new life. One of the traditions of this day is a cooking tradition, to take all the leftovers that are lurking at the back of the fridge, fill a pot with some blessed water, and make soup.

Epiphany, January 6, is the end of the Christmas season. It is the day set aside to remember how the Magi followed the light of the star to find Jesus. Next Sunday, we will celebrate Epiphany by telling the Magi's story and sharing communion.

My prayer for you this season is that you will make the time to hold these days in your hands as you would a treasured gift. And I invite you to make Jesus' vision of peace, hope, joy and love more real in your own life, and in your corner of the wonderful world God made.

Sources Used:

Sabbath Keeping, Doris Schaper, Cowley Publications, 1999.

These Twelve Days- A Family Guide to After Christmas Celebrations, James Kasperson and Marina Lachecki, United Church Press, 1999.

The Oxford Book of Christmas Poems, Oxford University Press, 1992 (poem used was written by Ruth Sawyer).