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Tradition holds that the song “The Twelve Days of Christmas” is a coded message about the basic teachings of Christianity. These messages were hidden in code due to the religious wars in England in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. While on the surface this song might sound like a bunch of nonsense, it contains the wisdom of the Christian faith. In my house, we have been singing this song at the breakfast, lunch and supper table, and so I am eager to share with you, or at the very least remind you, of what it’s all about.

So, we begin at the end.

Twelve drummers drumming refer to the twelve points of doctrine made in the Apostle’s Creed. This creed is the summation of the Christian faith.

Eleven pipers piping were the disciples after Judas left the group.

Who were these eleven? Simon Peter, Andrew, James son of Alphaeus,

John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James, Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James.

Who or what are the ten lords a-leaping? They are the Ten Commandments! You shall have no other gods before you. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vane. Honor the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Honor your parents. Do not kill. Do not cheat on your spouse. Do not steal. Do not gossip about your neighbor. Do not want anything that others have.

What about the nine ladies dancing? These are the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

And the eight maids a-milking? These are the eight Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger

and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and the persecuted.

What are the seven swans a-swimming? These are the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: 1) prophecy, 2) ministry, 3) teaching, 4) exhortation, 5) giving, 6) leading, and 7) compassion.

And the six geese a-laying? These are the six days of creation.

Five Golden Rings! These are the Five Books of the Old Testament referred to as the Torah, or the books of the law. These are: Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. These books give the history of humanity's sinful failure and God's response of grace in the creation of a people to be a light to the world.

Four calling birds are the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These books of the Bible proclaim the Good News of God's reconciliation of the world to Himself in Jesus Christ.

Three French Hens are the three virtues of faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love, according to St. Paul in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Corinthians.

What are the two turtle doves? These are the Old and New Testaments of the Bible.

And finally, drum roll please, the partridge in a pear tree...

This of course is Jesus Christ, the One whose birth we celebrate today. In the song, Christ is symbolically presented as a mother partridge that feigns injury to decoy predators from her helpless nestlings, recalling the expression of Christ's sadness over the fate of Jerusalem: "Jerusalem! Jerusalem! How often would I have sheltered you under my wings, as a hen does her chicks, but you would not have it so . . . ." (Luke 13:34)

So, there it is, the entire song. Now you know what it means and perhaps have even learned something along the way, or at least, been reminded of things you already knew.

But even if you didn't learn something or weren't reminded of something you should already know, it is still Christmas. Because, you see, Christmas isn't in the learning, even in the form of a fun, cryptic song. Christmas isn't even in the feeling, especially to those of you who pretend to celebrate Christmas today but feel empty inside. Christmas isn't in the experiencing, for those of you who don't feel the thrill of Christmas that you did as a kid. And Christmas isn't in the understanding of the mystery of the incarnation and a God who came into this world to die for us.

Christmas is a reality unto itself, which exists because God is merciful and loving. Christmas, in the end, isn't about our capacity to understand or articulate the subtle nuances of the nativity of the Christ child. It isn't about

our ability to put on a good show in church or a good spread for lunch. It isn't even about our good-hearted willingness to sing beautiful carols and give gifts to other people.

It is about a God and a mystery and a birth and a death.

It is about a partridge in a pear tree, a man who died on a cross of wood in order to open the kingdom of heaven to all people. It is about a God who comes to us and wears our flesh and walks with us and lives with us, eats with us, cries with us. It is about a God who knows full well the pain of living a fleshly existence, and the physical and mental sufferings that go along with it. And it is about a God who gives us the greatest gift the world has ever known—the gift of his only Son, born in a manger, this One who will one day die for your sake on a cross in order to give you eternal life.

Whether you understand it or not, where you feel it or not, whether you experience it or not, Christ still has come to us at Christmas. The

Greatest Reality known to mankind has entered our existence. The Greatest King ever to ascend a throne has begun his reign. And the most amazing thing is that this reality, this kingdom—this kingly, majestic and otherworldly reign—includes me and includes you.