

# Faith and Life

# REFLECTIONS

December 2008

## "The Twelve Days of Christmas"

Faith and Life Reflections are a monthly resource for lay and rostered leaders on headlines, current books, movies, and social and ethical issues. Comments may be returned to the writer, George Keck, or to the editor, Mark A. Staples, email [Mstaples@Ltsp.edu](mailto:Mstaples@Ltsp.edu).

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### Focus of our Reflection

This seasonal reflection focuses on the Twelve Days of Christmas and their meaning for us as Christians. In addition to providing an opportunity for personal or group conversation, this reflection piece also points to a free study guide available on the web that helps us take note of the observance of these critical days in our faith lives as they relate to cultures around the world. We invite you to download the guide and to use it at home during the season ahead. Note how the guide also recognizes important music for the season in the new worship book, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)*. Enjoy!?

### Introductory thoughts

*How the Grinch Stole Christmas* by Dr. Seuss is one of the best-known children's books. The Grinch, a cave-dwelling creature, lives up on a mountain looking down into the village of Whoville. Envious of the Christmas happiness in the village, the Grinch descends into the town and steals all of the Christmas presents in order to "prevent Christmas from coming."

With the Grinch in mind, I have been wondering who has stolen the Twelve Days of Christmas from the piety and practices of most congregations. Who has stolen the "twelve" days and turned Christmas into nothing more than one or two services on Christmas Eve?

The result is that we have moved Christmas into the "day before" and almost totally ignore the rich heritage of the Christmas season!

Christmas is not a day, but a season. Actually, Christmas is a 12-day season lasting from December 25 to January 5 during which Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ.



Why 12 days? The Bible does not provide a date when Jesus was born. So about 400 years after Jesus' birth, the early church designated December 25 and the 11 days that followed as the Christmas Season. This period of time was chosen because it was within the winter solstice – the time when the nighttime was the longest.

In the Middle Ages, this period was one of continuous celebration that climaxed on Twelfth Night, the traditional end of the Christmas season. Twelfth Night even became part of our literary heritage when William Shakespeare used it for one of his most famous plays, titled *Twelfth Night*.

Who stole the Christmas Season? I am not trying to be a "Grinch" and place the blame on our Americanized fascination with Christmas parties (during Advent) and after-Christmas sales that begin on December 26. We live in a pluralistic culture, so let us not blame the culture. Rather than complain about commercialization, I think the church has a wonderful opportunity to use our diversity as a way

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of regaining the rich traditions and heritage that can be found in the Twelve Days of Christmas around the world.

Christmas, as we know it today, is a product of hundreds of years of both secular and religious traditions from around the globe. Since we now are living in an increasingly diverse culture, the Twelve Days of Christmas provide a wonderful opportunity to learn about the rich Christmas traditions of other Christians around the world. Today, Lutherans also have a new resource, the *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW), with hymns from around the world!

Since Christmas day is usually filled with gift giving and family gatherings, don't change the routine. Rather, talk about "Why we do these things?" Are they related to your ethnic background? Are they old family traditions? What foods do we usually have? How do our normal family traditions help us focus on God's gift to us? Light a candle and read Hymn 277 (ELW) "Away in the Manger" as a family prayer or devotion.

The Twelve Days of Christmas (Dec. 25 to Jan. 5) come at a perfect time to expand the fun of Christmas. The holiday parties are over. Children are not in school and have extra time. Now you have time to talk about the Christmas traditions in your family. Best of all, the Twelve Days of Christmas are an opportunity to share your Christmas story and learn from your neighbors' traditions.

I've helped the seminary to prepare a new, free study guide for the Twelve Days of Christmas (see [www.ltsp.edu/12days](http://www.ltsp.edu/12days)). Check it out. You will be surprised how easy it is to include the Twelve Days of Christmas into your schedule. Here are some ideas from the guide.

- Meal time is always a good option. Several times, plan to eat food from another culture.
- Plan to have an ELW (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*) or other book at home with you. Each day you will be able to read a Christmas carol from

around the world.

- Each day, light one candle on the table as a symbol of Jesus being with us.
- Each day, plan to read the text for the day about the customs from other countries. Visit or talk to your neighbors, or other family members, who may have a heritage from another culture.
- As appropriate, involve younger children in crafts, giving gifts, or talking with neighbors about their Christmas traditions.

Enjoy celebrating the Twelve Days of Christmas!

### Discussion questions

- If Christmas is a "season of 12 days," who/what stole that from the piety and practice in your congregation?
- What is lost, or what is gained, in our worship life when Christmas is focused only on the day before Christmas (Christmas Eve)?
- What are some of the ways that Christmas could become more of a "season" in the worship and education of your congregation?
- Read *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*. What happens when the Grinch returns the things that had been taken away?

### Resources for the Twelve Days

- You can get a copy of the guide for the Twelve Days of Christmas at [www.ltsp.edu/12days](http://www.ltsp.edu/12days). Copies of this resource guide may be reproduced for use with groups in your congregation, or make copies for distribution to all members of the congregation.
- Get your own copy of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW) for use at home.



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