

New Year's Day 2017 Meditation

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Those of you who are keeping track are aware, of course, that today is the “eight maids a-milking” day. You know, from the song, “On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me . . . ” and so forth. Today is the eighth day of Christmas, and according to that famous counting song, your true love should give you eight milkmaids, or, more accurately and appropriately, should lend you their services, for which, according to PNC Bank, you would pay \$58, which is eight times the federal minimum wage of \$7.25, which hasn't changed since 2009. PNC Bank has been calculating the cost of those twelve gifts given on the twelve days of Christmas since 1984, when the whole lot would have cost you \$18,849.97. This year, that same batch of gifts would set you back \$34,363.49.

The milking maids and the swimming swans and the laying geese and the leaping lords and all the rest of them are part of the “Twelve Days of Christmas” song, which is one of the few moments when our popular culture preserves a remnant of what we used to call Christendom, when Christianity was much more embedded in our culture than it is today. The twelve days of Christmas, as we know them through the song, were made popular by the English composer Frederic Austin in 1909, but their Christian roots are very deep, stretching back as far as the fourth century. The days we only sing about today are the twelve days between Christmas and Epiphany, and those twelve days make up the liturgical season of Christmastide. For most of Christian history, it was during the Christmas season, and not during Advent, that we celebrated Christmas – gifts were exchanged, special foods were prepared, and carols were sung, as we're doing this morning.

But then, somewhere in the early 19th century, things took a turn, and the celebration of Christmas got flipped on its head. Some writers think that the culprit, ironically, was Clement Clarke Moore, a professor of languages, divinity, and Biblical literature at the General Theological Seminary in New York City. Most of us would never have heard of Clement C. Moore had he not published a poem, anonymously, in 1823 entitled “A Visit from St. Nicholas,” which you and I learned as children as “’Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house,” and so on. In that poem, Moore took the old Dutch custom of giving gifts on New Year's Day and transferred it to Christmas Day, and the commercial importance of the days before Christmas as a shopping season was born. And that aspect of Christmas – the buying and the selling, the giving and the receiving – became the tail that began to wag the dog, so that by 1850, when Harriet Beecher Stowe published her book, *The First Christmas in New England*, she could have a character complain that the true meaning of Christmas had been lost in a shopping spree. So if you want to know when, as a culture, we lost the true meaning of Christmas, it was about then. We also lost the seasons of both Advent and Christmastide, which were abandoned to the churches, where they remain today.

And so, here in the church, we remain a little weird and we still celebrate the year one season at a time. We don't allow Christmas to eclipse Thanksgiving, and we don't allow back to school sales to obliterate the Fourth of July. And we keep Christmastide, and we tell the little story of Jesus's birth as part of the big story of creation and redemption, and we light our candles and we sing our carols after everyone else has packed up the decorations, put away the Christmas CDs, and kicked the tree to the curb. It's our job to be a little weird in the church – weird in the good sense of quirky and vibrant with local color, and not weird in the bad sense of scary and creepy – so that we can perpetually remind the world that their business-as-usual isn't all the business that needs doing. We march to the beat of a different little drummer boy, you and I and the rest of our Christian relatives, and we take our orders not

from the outgoing administration or the incoming one, but from the eternal one, the uncreated Word of God whose coming in human form we celebrate in this season of joy.

So my prayer and wish for you all on this first day of the new civil year is that you will continue in a blessed Christmastide, that you will enjoy a happy New Year, and that you will help keep the church – and, through our witness, a fragment of the culture – a little bit weird.