

Mardi Gras Party (2/17/04)
Melton Public Library (French Lick, Indiana)
Presentation script model
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“Farewell to Meat”: Mardi Gras or Carnival, The Party before Lent

Did you ever hear somebody say, “I’m giving it up for Lent”? In the Catholic Church, the six weeks before Easter are a serious time called Lent. It’s serious because for Christians, Easter is when Jesus died and rose from the grave, so during Lent you were getting ready for that by thinking about sacrifice, or giving things up. In the old days, Christians were supposed to give up eating meat and even milk and eggs during Lent, starting on the day called Ash Wednesday. Nowadays, some people will give up chocolate or watching their favorite TV show for Lent.

It’s hard to give things up, isn’t it? So in the weeks *before* Lent, people started a festival time so they could have lots of parties and do all the things they wouldn’t be able to during Lent. Since Lent begins on a Wednesday, the last day to party was called “Fat Tuesday”, which is what “Mardi Gras” means in French. The weeks leading up to Fat Tuesday were called “Carnevale” in Italian, which means “Goodbye to Meat”—since during Lent, you couldn’t eat meat! And *that’s* where we get our English word “carnival”, which we use today to mean a really exciting place where a lot of crazy things might be happening.

Carnival begins on Jan. 6, the day the three kings were supposed to have visited the baby Jesus. This day is also called “Twelfth Night,” since it comes twelve days after Jesus was born. Twelfth Night is a magical time, when things start getting turned upside down for carnival time. When you get older you might hear about a play by a man named William Shakespeare called *Twelfth Night*, which takes place during that upside-down time.

Christians all over the world have done different things to celebrate this carnival time: eating special foods, dressing up in costumes and especially wearing masks, having big parades and costume balls, and dancing in the streets! There are some very old carnival customs all through Europe, everywhere from Italy to Germany to Spain. When Europeans came to America they brought their ways to celebrate with them, and made new customs, too. The most famous carnival celebration in America is Mardi Gras in the city of New Orleans, Louisiana, where European Catholic customs for carnival time blended with African traditions of costumes and dancing brought by the slaves.

New Orleans Mardi Gras is a huge party, and people come from all over to see it. Mardi Gras even has its own colors: purple for justice, green for faith, and gold for power. Clubs called krewes spend months making costumes and designing big floats to show off in the Mardi Gras parade. When the parade comes, people in the crowd shout out, “Throw me something, mista!” and the krewe members throw out trinkets: strings of beads, coins called doubloons, and plastic cups. People dance in crazy costumes, and there is lots of music.

Fancy masks are a big part of Mardi Gras, with lots of glitter and sequins and feathers. At Mardi Gras time people eat fancy cakes shaped in a ring, called King Cakes. Each King Cake has a little baby doll inside it, to represent the Baby Jesus. Whoever gets the doll is King or Queen for the day (and has to bring the cake for next year's party!). This year Mardi Gras will be February 24, one week from today.

Another place that is famous for its carnival celebrations is the country of Brazil in South America. In Brazil they call it Carnaval (car-nuh-VAHL). Big parades, fancy costumes, and lots of dancing are what Carnaval is all about. Clubs called samba schools compete to have the flashiest costumes, the best music and the most impressive dancers. The samba is a fun dance; we'll be hearing some samba music later. The samba schools have special divisions just for kids, and in the days before Ash Wednesday the schools close down so everybody can work on their parade costumes and dances. Don't you wish we had Carnaval here, so you could dance instead of going to school?

There are lots of other Mardi Gras and Carnival customs you can read about—and maybe even do some of them yourself! People around the world like to have a good party, especially when they know that they're going to have to be serious for a long time afterwards. Mardi Gras in New Orleans and Carnaval in Brazil are two great examples of having a blast before getting down to business.

Mardi Gras/Carnival facts:

General

- Mardi Gras = “Fat Tuesday” (the day before Ash Wednesday)
- Mardi Gras is the 7th Tuesday before Easter (47 days)
- This year Mardi Gras is Feb. 24
- The end of Carnival, the beginning of Lent
- “carnival” = “farewell to meat” (“carnevale” in Italian)
- Carnival time always starts on Jan. 6: “Twelfth Night” (12th after Christmas)
- Carnival time is party time: get it out of your system before Lent
- Christians used to give up meat for Lent, and often milk and eggs, as well as wearing bright colors or anything decorated
- Different carnival/mardi gras customs throughout Europe

New Orleans: Mardi Gras

- Clubs called krewes compete in parades with floats and costumes; also have private ballroom dances
- Famous krewe names: Rex; Bacchus; Comus; Zulu; Barkus (for pets!)
- Colors of Mardi Gras (chosen in 1872 by Rex, King of Carnival):
 - Purple for justice
 - Green for faith
 - Gold for power
- Crowds at parades call out “Throw me something, mista!”
- Krewes toss out trinkets, called “throws”
 - Strings of beads in Mardi Gras colors
 - Coins with the krewe’s symbol on them, called doubloons
 - Plastic cups
 - Some krewes have special throws, like the coveted coconut shells from Zulu
- King Cake
- Gumbo
- Country customs different from New Orleans
 - Teams race through town from house to house, collecting ingredients for gumbo

Brazil: Carnaval

- Clubs called samba schools compete in parades of dancers with fabulous costumes
 - Samba schools have children’s divisions
 - Samba is a dance and music style with a great beat and fancy footwork
 - Samba schools train and save for months to design the best costumes and choreography
- Schools shut down in week before Mardi Gras
- Fantastic dancing in the streets
- Strong African influences