

# Mardi Gras for the Soul

26 February 2006

Bible passage: **Psalm 126**

It seemed like a dream, too good to be true,  
When God returned Zion's exiles.  
We laughed, we sang,  
We couldn't believe our good fortune.  
We were the talk of the nations—  
"God was wonderful to them!"  
God *was* wonderful to us;  
We are one happy people.

And now, God, do it again—  
Bring rains to our drought-stricken lives  
So those who planted their crops in despair  
Will shout hurrahs at the harvest,  
So those who went off with heavy hearts  
Will come home laughing, with armloads of  
blessing.

**Sermon nugget:** We all need times of laughter and joy to lift our spirits and renew our energy. We'll call that for our purposes today "Mardi Gras for the Soul."

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"Mardi Gras"—yes, I know from my days of teaching French that "Mardi" is Tuesday, and that "gras" means "fat, so that means that "Mardi Gras" is "Fat Tuesday." And from my church experience, the day that is normally celebrated as "Mardi Gras" or "Fat Tuesday" is the day before Ash Wednesday, or the first day of Lent—the period of time for reflection, introspection and repentance that leads up to Easter Sunday. I knew all that.

However, what I didn't know was the origin of "Mardi Gras," so I did a little bit of research on the web, and found that it's a really ancient celebration. In many parts of the world, it's referred to as "Carnival," a word that comes from the Latin for saying farewell to things of the flesh, and that term has its roots in some of the feasts of the Middle Ages.

What we've come to know as Mardi Gras actually originated in the middle of the second century in Rome when the Romans embraced Christianity. The early church leaders decided it was better to incorporate certain parts of what was considered a pagan ritual into the new faith, rather than to attempt to do away with those aspects of the old thing altogether. So, Carnival or Mardi Gras became a time of abandonment, fun and laughter that preceded the time of Lent, a time of self-deprivation.

In many parts of the world, the celebration of Mardi Gras is not reserved to just one day, the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday. It actually begins on January 6<sup>th</sup>, or 12<sup>th</sup> Night, or what the church calls "Epiphany." According to legend, January 6<sup>th</sup> marks the day the gift-bearing wise guys visited the baby Jesus. It's not just one day, but rather an entire season.

Mardi Gras came to New Orleans through its French heritage in 1699. Early arrivals to the area celebrated this holiday, and throughout the years, those later inhabitants of New Orleans added to it by having parades and balls, masks and trinkets. Another little piece that I was not aware of is that New Orleans is not the only place that claims Mardi Gras celebrations. Apparently, it's a part of the tradition all along the Gulf coast, from Galveston to Mobile to Fort Walton Beach. Carnivals that draw thousands of tourists are part of their yearly celebration.

What about this year? After hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated so much of that area, it may seem incongruous to some that such frivolous celebrations would consume the energies of so many who are concerned with the basic necessities of the life that they once had. Nonetheless, from all reports, Mardi Gras will go on as usual, and in the minds of some, it is even more important than ever to cities that have borne the brunt of so much devastation.

After reading and studying the Bible passage for today, I think I have begun to realize why it's so important that this celebration take place, particularly this year. Our passage is the entirety of Psalm 126 that goes like this:

*It seemed like a dream, too good to be true,  
When God returned Zion's exiles.  
We laughed, we sang,  
We couldn't believe our good fortune.  
We were the talk of the nations—  
"God was wonderful to them!"  
God *was* wonderful to us;  
We are one happy people.*

*And now, God, do it again—  
Bring rains to our drought-stricken lives  
So those who planted their crops in despair  
Will shout hurrahs at the harvest,  
So those who went off with heavy hearts  
Will come home laughing, with armloads of  
blessing.*

Probably this psalm was written to celebrate the return of the exiles to their promised land, and it tries to express the joy of the people. It also acknowledges that others recognized the goodness of God because of the exiles' return and they saw it as cause for celebration. Even though they are home once again in their land, there continues to be difficulty and challenge, so they pray for God to "do it again—to bring rains to their drought-stricken lives." They want to be able to laugh and shout for joy once more.

Do you see why this passage is so applicable to those living along the Gulf coast? Many who called New Orleans and other parts of Louisiana and Mississippi home are now displaced, and they are not in their homeland, because that land is experiencing a time of despair. They yearn for God to

act for the good in their lives, so they can come home laughing and shouting songs of joy.

And those who are living in the south lands are ready to be thankful for what they do have, and that they are there to laugh and play and rejoice in the goodness that they *have* experienced. They need Mardi Gras, because it will be good for the soul; it will lift their spirits, and they will know the healing power of laughter.

I don't think we have to have lived through a hurricane's devastation or a tornado's fury to need a little Mardi Gras for the soul. All kinds of thing can throw us into a state of despair. Sometimes it's relationships that always seem to be rocky; sometimes it's jobs that are filled with uncertainty. Sometimes there are financial woes that beset us, and at other times there are those inevitable losses in life that can totally derail us. We need a Mardi Gras for the soul

One of the ways we can actually experience a Mardi Gras moment to lift our spirits is through the wonderful gift God has given us—the gift of laughter. We've talked before about the multiple benefits of laughter and having fun, so there's no need to repeat all the good things that happen when we have a good laugh.

Suffice it so say that there's no better medicine for healing, nor any better exercise for our bodies, minds and spirits, than laughter. Others agree. For instance, Dorothy Lessing said, "Laughter is by definition healthy," and Linda Knight hit the nail on the head when she said, "The best blush to use is laughter: It puts roses in your cheeks and in your soul"

Laughter can defuse some of the most annoying little moments of our lives. Take sitting behind the wheel of a car when we're stuck in traffic. How do you handle that? I have to admit that I'm not a very good example of the best way to be, because I'm changing radio stations desperately trying to find one that will tell me what's going on, so I can take some side streets and get out of the mess that everyone else is in.

I tend not to be very patient, but I did hear about a person who has chosen to take a humorous slant on that kind of situation that I would like to adopt as my own. This person has taken a look at the extreme of the situation in which she finds herself, and asks a rhetorical question: "am I really stuck in traffic forever? Is an anthropologist going to do a dig along this highway 1,000 years from now and find me encapsulated in some kind of hardened rock formation? When we choose to take a different look at any situation that occurs, we will be able to find the humor, and that has a way of lightening the dire nature of the so-called dilemma.

Even businesses have figured out that laughter and fun create an more enjoyable, and thus a more productive, work environment. There's an effort afoot to de-stress the workforce with more than just the usual birthday cake in the break room. At Ketchum, which is a global public relations

firm, they're using an initiative called "Thank God it's Monday," which includes free massages and shoe shines, as well as spontaneous pep rallies. Yahoo is a company that has put "fun" alongside "community" and "innovation" among its six core values. (I hope you recall that fun is an inherent part of The Garden's vision statement. We say, "The Garden is a celebration of life," and by that, we mean that life is good, and worthy of enjoyment and laughter.)

So, what about us? Have we added fun, laughter and celebration to our core values? Is laughter a part of every single day of our lives? If not, why not? What can we do to include a daily dose of hearty laughter in our lives—laughter that will lighten our loads and lift our spirits? We need a Mardi Gras for the soul, and today is a good day to start.

#### CLOSING:

So, OK, this Tuesday is the official day of Mardi Gras, and I want everyone of us to promise ourselves and one another that this Tuesday, and every day, will be Mardi Gras for the soul.

Have a great Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.