

Video: Beginning of Lent

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The Tradition of Poon Paregentan

Poon Paregentan, a celebration of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox faith, is much like Mardi Gras (or Fat Tuesday) in other Christian denominations. It has a religious base, yet it's all about having some fun before the season of Lent, a more reflective time of spiritual renewal, self-examination and reconciliation, begins.

This week, millions of Christians around the world will begin Lent, a 40-day period of fasting, prayer and almsgiving reflecting the 40 days that Jesus spent in the desert following His baptism, preparing for His ministry.

Just as Jesus prepared for His ministry, Christians use the Lenten season to prepare for Easter - the Feast of Feasts, Jesus' Resurrection.

For some, Lent begins on Ash Wednesday. For others, such as the Armenian Church and Eastern churches that do not observe Ash Wednesday, Lent begins Monday, tomorrow.

This weekend, while many festively celebrate Mardi Gras or Carnivale, many Armenian Churches will relish "one last feast" for Poon Paregentan. Meaning "joyous living day," Poon Paregentan is celebrated in a very festive fashion.

As we prepare for Medz Bahk (Great Lent) on Poon Paregentan (Joyous Living Day), Armenian faithful will view themselves in the Garden of Eden, living in the joy and abundance that God had intended. But during the Badarak, the Divine Liturgy of main worship in the Armenian Church, the altar curtain will be closed, as a physical sign that things are changing. The closing of the curtain is a symbol of exclusion from the Kingdom of God -- just as Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden.

The curtain remains closed during Medz Bahk, as a stark reminder of the need for forgiveness and restoration. It is opened again with an elaborate, joyful ceremony on Palm Sunday, signaling the end of Great Lent.

As with most Christian denominations, this also begins Holy Week - Avak Shapat - leading the faithful to the great Feast of the Resurrection of Christ - Easter, or Zadig.