

J.D. Ousley
Sermon—9Jun19 Pentecost
Acts 2
“Nine O’clock in the Morning”

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

I don’t know about you, but I like a quiet beginning to my day.

I’m content with a cup of coffee, a bowl of cereal, and some time at my computer working on the week’s sermon. It’s not a very exciting time for me—and that’s how I prefer it! I would just as soon save any excitement for later in the day.

That wasn’t a possible choice, though, for the members of the Church on the morning of the first Christian Pentecost. On that morning, they saw flames of fire! They were changed inside by their first experience of the Holy Spirit. They even began to speak in tongues.

The followers of Christ got so enthusiastic on Pentecost that some of the onlookers thought that the Christians must have been drinking! The bystanders sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

Fortunately, St. Peter quickly set the record straight. “Indeed,” he said, “these [people] are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only *nine o'clock in the morning*.”

What the bystanders actually saw was church members rejoicing in their new experience of God. They had received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Now as we ponder this extraordinary event, and we think about what it might mean for us, today, we can note that some Christians through the ages have hoped to gain such exciting moments for themselves.

People of faith have sought visions or they have hoped to speak in tongues. For them, religion has meant receiving amazing experiences from God. The quest for such experiences is the heart of their faith.

To this day, there are churches where the members arrive on Sunday morning expecting to dance! They won’t be surprised if some members of the congregation get so excited that they faint! These Christians want their faith to have a strong emotional component.

Unfortunately, the quest for religious experience can have drawbacks. People can get hooked on the feelings that they get in church. And after that, the excitement fades.

In this regard, it’s worth remembering that Ecstasy is also a *drug*! It’s a drug that disco-goers take to keep them dancing through the night.

A recent article in *The New Yorker* magazine actually discussed the relationship between religious experience and being under the influence of drugs. The author of the article grew up in a large conservative church in Texas.

Although she enjoyed some aspects of her religion when she was a child, she was less happy with it when she became an adult. Eventually, she decided to leave the church.

During the next few years, the woman experimented with a wide variety of mood-changing drugs, like LSD. In the *New Yorker* article, she seems to suggest that the ecstatic experiences she gained from drugs weren’t all that different from the encounters with the transcendent that she had experienced when she practiced her religion.

I really can’t comment on the woman’s observations—though I would note that millions of Christians have a relationship with God without feeling the need for any chemical stimulation.

Yet the issue of how emotions contribute to our faith remains tricky for us Episcopalians. As I have noted in past sermons, we usually keep our emotions firmly under control! We don't come to church for a weekly time of ecstasy!

But that doesn't mean our faith has to be devoid of feeling. Our faith still can be relied upon to give us good vibes. We may not feel intoxicated at nine o'clock in the morning. But we do have times of emotional uplift.

For me, I find that there are moments in my life when I feel not exactly ecstatic, but I do feel uplifted. During these times, I'm able to get out of my own head, and I can detect the transcendent beyond me.

I love Easter hymns, for example. I can't wait for our 11 o'clock Easter service to begin with the familiar hymn, "Hail thee festival day."

And I also get spiritual uplift outside of church. Thinking of our recent weather, I can say that I'm inspired by the crisp dry air and bright sunshine of a perfect spring day—a day that the Lord has made.

I may also be spiritually energized as I anticipate a dinner that I have scheduled with a friend. My friend is a priest, and he and I share a number of common interests and mutual friends.

So I know that we will have much to talk about. We will speak easily and comfortably to each other. Like the disciples of Jesus, the priest and I will share the common language of friendship in the Spirit.

My point, then, is that just because we're Episcopalians doesn't mean that we can't experience God's spirit!

We do need to admit that our particular religion don't come with the *predictability* that is found in other, feeling-centered forms of Christianity. Moments of deep feeling for us tend to be more random.

Notice that on the Day of Pentecost, the disciples were *surprised* by the coming of the Holy Spirit. We too may be surprised when the Spirit enters our lives.

Despite that fact that I'm religious, I'm surprised when I find myself suddenly thinking about God's gifts to me. When I feel grateful just to be alive. When I feel gratitude for grace!

Yet I have these feelings more often when I look for them. God is better able to communicate with us when we are trying to communicate with him.

As we heard in the lesson earlier: when the Holy Spirit was first manifested to a group of the followers of Jesus, the bystanders from various countries suddenly heard the disciples speaking in their native languages.

In fact, our quest for spiritual experience can be something like *learning a language*. For most adults, learning a foreign language takes a lot of study and practice. But eventually, something clicks in your brain, and you find that you're speaking that language. It's no longer "foreign" to you.

Now as you practice your faith you will also be aware that your accent is far from perfect, and your vocabulary is limited. You will still have a lot to learn about religion.

But you will feel that you're on the right path. If you don't exactly feel ecstatic at nine o'clock in the morning, you will feel closer to God, and you will be thankful for the gift of his Spirit.

And now unto God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit be ascribed as is most justly due all might, majesty, power, dominion, and praise, now and forever. Amen.