

## What Does Success Look Like for FBC, #1: Excellent Worship

First Baptist Church Decatur

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Texts: Psalm 8; Hebrews 4:12-13

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### Introduction

This morning we embark on a five-week series that I am calling “What Does Success Look Like for FBC: The 5 E’s.” This is my effort to cast at least an immediate vision for our church and to set certain specific goals. Without a vision, the people perish, and it seems to me that it has been a long while since we had a clear statement of goals for our church. So I am attempting it, under the title “what does success look like.”

Perhaps the first thing to be said about this question is that it is strikingly difficult to establish metrics of success for churches. It’s difficult, at least, if you don’t reduce your success measures merely to numbers. It is possible to measure numbers. It is much harder to measure things like whether people are growing closer to Jesus, whether our efforts to serve our community are bearing fruit, and whether people are following Jesus’ teachings more faithfully. It’s so much easier to measure wins and losses in sports, or profits in business, or rising test scores in education.

But I have attempted to set five goals for us anyway. I think these goals are all biblically grounded. They aim at congregational consensus. They involve staff as well as members. And they can be immediately pursued. By articulating them I also give you a deeper look into my heart and the things that I think are important. I have never spoken on any of these issues in my appearances in this pulpit over many years. So here goes.

### Our Need to Worship: Psalm 8

This morning our OT text is Psalm 8. This is my very favorite psalm, and there are so very many profound ones. But this one is mine. Somehow it connects to my spirit in an especially direct way.

It reads like a text written by someone who is standing outside looking up at the stars, something that I have always loved to do:

*O Lord, our Sovereign  
How majestic is your name in all the earth!  
You have set your glory above the heavens...  
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers  
The moon and the stars that you have established;*

Probably all of us can connect with this straightforward, impassioned expression of awe at the grandeur of the universe. We look up at what we can see of the millions and millions of stars and we are simply overwhelmed. Our thoughts turn to the greatness of the One who made them. We struggle to find words to name that greatness.

And then we look at ourselves. We are so small by comparison.

*What are human beings that you are mindful of them  
Mortals that you care for them?*

The grandness of the universe evokes our worship of the God who made it. But as we worship we sense our own smallness. Here I am. Little old me. One of billions who look up at these galaxies. Are you listening to me, o great Creator? Do you care for me, of all these people? Such a tiny part of everything you made? And yet faith affirms:

*You have made them a little lower than God  
And crowned them with glory and honor.*

The NRSV is trying to avoid male pronouns here, and so it translates everything in the plural. Try it now in the singular. Try it for yourself.

*When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers,  
The moon and the stars that you have established  
What am I that you are mindful of me,  
A human being that you care for me?  
Yet you have made me a little lower than the angels/God  
And crowned me with glory and honor.*

And so I exclaim:

*O Lord, our Sovereign,  
How majestic is your name in all the earth!*

I believe that the first and fundamental purpose of any house of worship is to provide a setting to actually worship, to bow before the God who made the universe, to exclaim our praise, to return thanks to the One who made us and the world. We meet weekly to come back to dead center, to this place in which we encounter and worship God, to reset our lives around the God who is our origin, center, and destiny.

This means that the first and most fundamental task of those who lead houses of worship, and those who plan services of worship, is to create a context in which people hungry to worship are given opportunity to do so. Success in church work certainly is measurable by whether people who are hungry to worship are able to worship in our house of worship.

This should be simple, right? I mean, you can go outside on a clear night and worship. You can go to the beach and watch the sun rise and worship. So it ought to be easy to go to the place designed for worship and be able to worship.

Well, it's not quite as easy as that. Successful worship requires both human effort and divine grace. Worship leaders must prepare carefully. Musicians, readers, and preachers must be skilled -- and more than skilled, they must be inspired. The physical setting must be conducive to worship. Distractions must be as limited as possible. Sound systems must work. Slides must be readable. Songs must be singable. I note in passing that all of this takes money.

But more than that, of course -- both leaders and people must be ready to worship. More: hungry to worship. There is a paradox about worship that offers deep insight into human nature -- even though it can be said that one of our very deepest human needs is to worship God, worshipping God does not come easy for us. We go wrong in two very different directions -- either we lose interest in or capacity to worship (perhaps temporarily, perhaps permanently) or we misdirect our worship. We worship the wrong things. It's interesting to watch how someone who no longer wants to worship God is more than willing to worship the Georgia Bulldogs or the Crimson Tide.

So designing a worship service involves the very subtle task of inviting, even enticing, people to do what they really need to do but find difficult to do. Worship leaders need to gently, but firmly, and very skillfully, take people by the hand and lead them near the presence of God. After that, it is up to each worshipper to actually worship. A worship service can take you near the Divine Presence. You must do the rest.

Have you worshipped God so far this morning? Did you come ready? Has your heart been open? Have we done our parts well "up here"? Success for FBC looks like a lot of yeses to those questions, leading to such profound weekly experiences of the worship of God that people just can't wait to get to church each Sunday.

#### Our Need for God's Word: Hebrews 4:12-13

I also believe that excellent worship involves a substantive encounter with the Word of God. Hebrews 4:12-13 is a great text for getting at this critically important theme:

*The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword; piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.*

Worship is not "just" our awestruck encounter with what God has already made or already done. It is not an encounter with a mute God. Both the Jewish and Christian traditions very strongly affirm that worship is an encounter with a living God, in particular, with a God who speaks to human beings, a God whose Word itself carries divine authority and power.

I claim that just as people need to worship, they (we) also very much need a Word from God in the experience of worship. We need God to speak to us, to tell us something, to reveal something true to us. We need to hear from God. Hearing from God is another way of talking about the Word of God.

The Word of God has an extraordinary supernatural power that Hebrews describes so strikingly here. We experience it as a kind of living divine sword, penetrating into us with its force, unveiling lies that we have been believing, revealing sins that we have been concealing, shining light on a path forward that we have been avoiding.

Excellent worship involves encounter with the Word of God, like this. We can hear God's Word in and through a great song; a personal testimony; a heartfelt prayer; an experience of Communion; and of course, in Scripture and preaching. I am not saying that the only place one hears a Word from God is in the Bible or in preaching. But I am saying that I think excellent worship includes leading people into an encounter with the Word of God, one aspect of which is experienced in the reading and hearing of scripture and in the event of preaching.

We are not fundamentalists at First Baptist Church. We are long past the legalisms, rigidities, and absurdities of fundamentalism. But may we never outgrow a hunger for the Word of God, a receptiveness to the Word of God, and an eager expectancy that we will hear a Word from God when hymns are sung, scripture is read, and preaching begun. We believe in a God who speaks and who wants to be heard; and not just heard, but obeyed; and not just obeyed, but loved; and who comes to meet us in worship if we will but ready our hearts, reverently anticipating what God will say to us.

### Conclusion

My first goal for our church in the next season of our life (and of course always) is that we will be a community that offers and experiences excellent worship, as I have attempted to describe it this morning. First Baptist Church must be a place where people who want to worship God can succeed in doing so. As part of that, FBC must be a place where people hungry for the Word of God can hear that Word.

Churches have discovered that aesthetic preferences matter when it comes to worship. Some people can't worship without pews and stained glass and others can't worship with pews and stained glass. Some people can't worship without the hymn book and others can't worship with it. We have settled this question here by creating two different worship experiences each Sunday and this needs to continue.

I should also mention that the wide range of Bible study classes and small groups also are contexts for worship and encounter with God's Word, and they vary dramatically. That's perfectly fine, even wonderful. Indeed, we need meaningful contexts for experiencing worship and encountering God's Word for every different kind of age cohort and social location

represented in our community. This is why I am exceptionally pleased that we are now starting Bible studies for college students and young adults, where we have been weak in recent years. Pray for the success of the college group led by Peter and Monique Wischusen and the upcoming young adult effort led by Tex Grubbs and Mark Parnell.

I leave you with two challenges.

Come to church hungry to worship and hungry for the Word of God. See what happens when you are maximally open to God's presence and to God's Word.

Look for people around you who are just as hungry as you are. Invite them here. They will encounter staff and volunteer worship leaders who are just as hungry, and who are committed to offering excellent worship.

And together we will celebrate the greatness and the goodness of God, saying:

*O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*