

Today
Vision Sunday, September 7, 2014
Psalm 95

Introduction

For several months now, I have been looking forward to this Sunday and the message that I would bring to you. It is an important day. For most of this year, the facility development team and the deacons have been developing plans for the refreshment of this facility with Station 19. Later today, those proposed plans will be unveiled and we will have an opportunity to respond to them. Additionally, this Sunday closely coincides with my second anniversary as your lead pastor and, of course, September is the perfect time to reload for a full year of ministry together. All of those factors have converged to make this a very strategic and important day in the life of our church.

Last week we just concluded our summer series of sermons on the Psalms. It has been a rich experience as we discovered the deep prayer language of the psalms. In considering what I wanted to share with you, my mind was brought back to one of the many psalms that recall Israel's story. In a greater sense, the church has taken Israel's place as the people of God – a “holy nation” Peter calls us. While Israel's story will always be unique, the way in which God dealt with them will always be instructive for the church today. Today should be a day of thanksgiving, celebration, and perspective. Psalm 95 holds all of those elements. It will be the framework for our consideration of God's work in First Baptist Church today.

Text

Oh come, let us sing to the Lord;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
For the Lord is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.

The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.

These opening verses of the psalm celebrate the sovereignty of God. He is the Creator and Ruler of this world. In a world that faces multiple dangers and challenges, God's ultimate control over all is a great comfort to those who are called by his name. And so we celebrate with joyful songs of praise!

The psalm then carries the theme of a sovereign God who is worthy to be worshipped to the intimacy of our relationship with him. It is the perfect expression of a perfect God. He is not the distant designer that the Deists had conceived two hundred and fifty years ago. He is the almighty God who guides and provides for his own people.

Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!
For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.

God's Blessings to Us

These words are such a comfort. The church is God's enterprise: not mine, not the deacons. It's not even the vote of the congregation that really matters. The New Testament tells us that Jesus Christ is the head of the church and that the gates of hell will not prevail against it. And in the last year, God has certainly blessed First Baptist. Let me recount just a few of the ways:

- The *Karen church* is thriving. Just this week, there was an article in the Aberdeen American News about the Karen community in our town. Who ever heard of employees throwing a party on Labor Day to honor their bosses? (They obviously haven't understood the history of the American Labor Movement.) But that's what the Karen have done. We are so blessed to have them as part of our church family. Just this year,

they have begun supporting their own missionary, Kyle Witmer, an American Baptist Missionary to Karen refugees in Thailand.

- We have reached a place of stability and peace in our *worship life*. I know not everyone is 100% happy every week with our music selection. But that's not the point. We are worshipping together with increasing understanding and doing so with an intergenerational approach. We are especially blessed to have high quality in our music for the size church that we are.
- The *prayer shawl ministry* is a quiet, but profound ministry to those who are hurting and in need of prayer and comfort. In the two years since their beginning, over two hundred prayer shawls have been distributed.
- Years ago we established the first evangelical Christian School in Aberdeen. But in the last ten years it had grown to such a size that it had taken over our facility. *Aberdeen Christian School* was unable to grow and our ministries were significantly hampered by the presence and the schedule of the school. In January of this year, ACS finally moved into their own campus through the convergence of many miraculous developments. God was certainly in the relocation of the school and I am still amazed at the grace in which the transition was made. We remain significant partners with them in their ministry, but their departure has opened a new world of opportunity and challenge for us in this place. This development, alone, is a significant factor in why we are able to consider a refresh of our facility to enhance the effectiveness of our mission at this time.
- It's been around for a little more than a year, but the popularity of *Fill My Cup Café* has helped us to become an even more hospitable and friendly church. More and more people are hanging out there before the service and it is an important place and ministry helping people to connect with one another.
- For over a year now, we have been talking about serving our community – about *becoming an externally-focused church*. That impulse will become more and more important to us as we clarify and understand the mission that God is calling us to in Aberdeen. In the spring, Jay Kusler organized our first “Serve Saturday” where several people got together and pitched in to help disadvantaged folks with spring clean-up.
- We are blessed to have a fine gym. It is being used virtually every week. It gets really crazy during basketball season. We are also blessed to have Pastor Knute Reiersen who

excels in *sports ministry* to manage the use of the facility to maximize its potential for the Kingdom. In a very exciting development last spring, we became one of the sites in the city to host the Upward Bound youth basketball ministry. Our gym is a significant asset and sports ministry is one area where we can leverage what God has graced us with for great effect in the Kingdom of God.

- A little less than a year ago, we brought on Pastor Dave Klass and his wife, Rebekah to lead our youth. That God was leading us in our selection of him has been evident all along. There are almost too many things to note in the growth of our youth ministry in the last year. The attendance numbers have more than doubled. They had strong participation in both Camp Judson and their mission trip to Chicago. The mission trip was, for many, life-changing and it has brought the group together. A new core of leaders is forming and being intentionally disciplined by Pastor Dave. There are at least two significant large group evangelistic events that they are planning for this fall. Last Friday, over forty kids showed up after the home football game at our youth center. We celebrate God's obvious blessings in our youth ministry.
- You are a *generous people* when the need is obvious. This year, we changed the structure of our benevolence fund, establishing a monthly offering that we receive each Communion Sunday. We have retained our partnership with Salvation Army, but we have been able to give much more directly to those in need in our community. Though we are only two month beyond the half-way point in the year, we've already given nearly 150% of what we gave last year. When a Russian immigrant family came to us in June, your outpouring of love and material was impressive and magnanimous. I have asked, and you have responded to meet the needs of my mission trip to Kenya this fall. All of these giving initiatives have been over and above our usual offerings. And while it is true that our offerings are a bit below our current and mission goals, I am confident that we will be able to meet our budget this year. Our giving has improved in the last year.
- These are not all of the things that God has done to bless us. There are, of course, many more. I would be remiss, however, if I didn't point out to you what is happening with the leadership of this church. During the last year, the deacons and other leaders have been studying a book called *Pursuing God's Will Together*. It is a deeply challenging book and is already changing the leadership paradigms from traditional corporate to spiritually

discerning. Of all the developments that have been happening in the church this year, the spiritual growth of our leaders I consider one of the most important. If First Baptist has leaders who will lead spiritually, then our future, no matter what the challenges, will always be full of promise.

But a lot of folks expect our church to fail. I see it on their faces every time I encounter people who know about the church. They kind of hang their head in sympathy and ask me how it's going. The truth is, it is challenging to follow a pastorate of fifty-two years. Pastor W.A. Criswell led First Baptist Dallas for over fifty years. The man who followed him with such promise crashed and burned after two years, permanently leaving the ministry. And while I do face some difficult challenges, I know with certainty that God has called me here. The question that many of my friends in the ministry are thinking but won't ask – will he survive? – is not relevant. It's not about me. The compelling issue is whether or not we as a church will follow God's leading.

Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
when your fathers put me to the test
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.
For forty years I loathed that generation
and said, "They are a people who go astray in their heart,
and they have not known my ways."
Therefore I swore in my wrath,
"They shall not enter my rest."

We are where we should be, but we can't stay here.

In the midst of our celebration – and we have much to celebrate – this is a very sobering warning. We are at a very strategic point in the life of our church. A couple of months ago I called Pastor Dave Phillips, who God had wonderfully provided to lead us through a very difficult interim period, to ask his opinion about the building refresh we are considering and

another important initiative that I've been praying about. We had a good conversation. But his words to me were sobering. He said, in effect, that the church will follow and move forward or resist and decline. There is no middle ground. I believe he is right. It's time to mobilize.

It is no small thing to follow a pastorate of 52 years. Frankly, the odds are stacked against us. We need to face that reality. Because of this unique situation, I have slowly initiated changes as opportunities have presented themselves. Significantly, we've moved forward in worship, youth ministry, and leadership development. Purposely, I didn't come in and establish a new mission and vision statement right from the start. We needed to get to know each other and discern the work that God has for us. Those pieces are now falling into place. We have a new mission statement that I believe is compelling: *Helping people find and follow Jesus*. You've seen it in print and heard it integrated into my recent messages.

We are right where we should be at this time. But we cannot stay here. First Baptist has always been an evangelistic church. But our American culture is quickly and dramatically changing. It is no longer friendly to the church and the gospel. Our witness needs to be compelling. We need a rigorous gospel to meet the challenge of our ever-darkening world. People need to see a difference in our lives if they are going to consider following Jesus. The gospel call never has been just to go to heaven when you die, but rather to repent and follow Jesus into the Kingdom of God today. That is the good news that Jesus preached. It is the gospel that we must preach. It is the good news that changes lives now and for eternity. That is why we have adopted our new mission statement: *helping people find and follow Jesus*. It is not only in the finding, but also in the following that our gospel must be clear.

This should make us all just a little uncomfortable. ☺ That means you and I must change. How has your life changed by the power of Christ in the last year? Can you answer that question? Are you making overcoming progress in your battle against sin this past year? Do you love God more today than you did at this time last year? Do you trust him more? Is your witness – your life in Christ – impacting people more and more around you? If you aren't changing, you aren't growing. And if you aren't growing, then you're not following Jesus. To be a follower of Jesus

is to change to become more and more like him. Anything else is self-deception and a religious game.

What does this have to do with Vision Sunday? Lots. There are several things we need to do and become if we are to fulfill our mission of helping people find and follow Jesus. We've got to love our community. He put us here for a reason. We have to ask ourselves: "If we had to close our doors tomorrow, would our community even notice. Would it make any difference to them?" God has opened new doors of love to the community through our benevolence ministry and he is now opening a door to serve the students and families of Lincoln School. In August, Pastor Don Craig of Sioux City encouraged us to be intentional to introduce others the Christ. By nature and by our upper Midwest culture, we are a private people. We have to change and that is a great risk. But New Testament believers opened and shared their lives with each other. One of the manifestations of our private nature is that we don't pray together. That has to change. Read the book of Acts. The people in the church devoted themselves to prayer together. It is wonderful to have a prayer sheet that we take home and pray privately over. God hears those prayers, certainly. But the greatest power in prayer – the prayer that shakes the ground and moves the hand of God – is the prayer that God's people do together. (Acts 4:31)

And what about this building? We are incredibly blessed. God has given us a lot. Did you know that our facility is worth more than nine million dollars? But, as you will hear today, it is long overdue for a refresh. The culture has changed in the last thirty years and our facility must be adapted to meet those changes if we are going to be hospitable and effective in helping people find and follow Jesus. If we are going to reach this community, we have to change and the community has to see it reflected in our building. The plans that will be presented reflect that understanding.

We have to do something with the facility. We will. But hear me well. The most important work to be done is in our hearts. We have all got to be willing to be changed – transformed if we are to fulfill the mission God has given us in Aberdeen. That is the harder part. Let the changes that we might make in this building be reflective of the greater transformation that is happening in our lives.

Marriage is one of God's great blessings in life. But it is also one of the most difficult challenges because it requires each person to change. A lot of couples get into trouble by trying to distract themselves from necessary personal change through doing some sort of project like a kitchen remodel. They think, "If we could get this done then we would be really happy" only to find out that building projects don't change lives.

Let's do something together. We have a great opportunity. But let it not distract us from the greater work – the more difficult but rewarding work – of changed lives by following Jesus. So the question before you and me today is, "Are you willing to have your life changed by following Jesus?" That is the full gospel. That is what I believe God is saying to First Baptist today.

"Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts,"

...Let's take up our cross and follow Jesus.