

September 12, 2021
Isaiah 50:4-9a; Mark 8:27-38
“Better When We Are Together”

Isaiah 50:4-9 Common English Bible

4 The Lord God gave me an educated tongue
to know how to respond to the weary
with a word that will awaken them in the morning.
God awakens my ear in the morning to listen,
as educated people do.

5 The Lord God opened my ear;
I didn't rebel; I didn't turn my back.

6 Instead, I gave my body to attackers,
and my cheeks to beard pluckers.

I didn't hide my face
from insults and spitting.

7 The Lord God will help me;
therefore, I haven't been insulted.

Therefore, I set my face like flint,
and knew I wouldn't be ashamed.

8 The one who will declare me innocent is near.
Who will argue with me?

Let's stand up together.
Who will bring judgment against me?
Let him approach me.

9 Look! The Lord God will help me.
Who will condemn me?

Mark 8:27-38 Common English Bible

27 Jesus and his disciples went into the villages near Caesarea Philippi. On
the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” 28 They
told him, “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others one of
the prophets.”

29 He asked them, “And what about you? Who do you say that I am?”

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Peter answered, "You are the Christ." 30 Jesus ordered them not to tell anyone about him. 31 Then Jesus began to teach his disciples: "The Human One must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the legal experts, and be killed, and then, after three days, rise from the dead." 32 He said this plainly. But Peter took hold of Jesus and, scolding him, began to correct him. 33 Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, then sternly corrected Peter: "Get behind me, Satan. You are not thinking God's thoughts but human thoughts."

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34 After calling the crowd together with his disciples, Jesus said to them, "All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me." 35 All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me and because of the good news will save them. 36 Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives? 37 What will people give in exchange for their lives? 38 Whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this unfaithful and sinful generation, the Human One will be ashamed of that person when he comes in the Father's glory with the holy angels."

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Two dogs, a Labrador and a Collie are walking along just enjoying their friendship, when finally the Collie turns to the Lab and says, "My life is a mess! My owner is mean, my girlfriend ran away with a Pomeranian and I'm as jittery as a cat!"

"Why don't you go see a psychiatrist?" asked the Lab. "I can't, said the Collie...you know I'm not allowed on the couch!"

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A general, an officer, an older lady, and an attractive young woman all board a train together.

As they ride along they go into a dark tunnel and can't see anything. Suddenly, they hear a quick smooch followed by a loud smack!

The old lady thinks, "That young girl has some fine morals, smacking a man for trying to steal a kiss."

The young woman thinks, “How odd, the general tried to kiss the old lady instead of me.”

The general thinks, “That officer is smart, he steals a kiss, and I get slapped.”

And the officer thinks, “I’m a GENIUS! I kiss the back of my hand, and get to slap a 4-star general!”

Pasquale Buzzelli arrived at his work on September 11, 2001 just like most every other day. However he just happened to work with the Port Authority on the 64th floor of one of the World Trade Center Towers. The first sense of trouble he had was while riding the elevator, it dropped several feet before he got to his office. Once he got to his desk, Buzzelli called his wife, Louise.

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“I said, ‘Don’t be alarmed, I’m OK, everything’s fine, just, can you put the television on, and tell me what you see, ’and she goes, ‘Oh my god, ’she goes, ‘A plane hit your building, ’”

At first, Buzzelli thought he wasn’t in danger because the crash was above him. But then he had a “very weird feeling, so surreal. And then as the news got to us we knew we could die,” he told the Sun newspaper in 2012.

He called Louise again, who said: “Why are you still there? And why are you calling me? Leave!” Buzzelli grabbed his briefcase, a flashlight, and some wet towels, then fled down the stairwell. Along the way, he encountered firefighters walking up. They told him to keep going.

By the time he reached the 22nd floor, the building had started to shake and rumble. Buzzelli told 60 Minutes that he dove into a corner and got into a fetal position. “I felt the wall that I was laying next to just crack,

and the floor give away, and I stayed tucked in the fetal position with my eyes closed. "I felt this, this wind rush, as I was falling and, you know, this abrasive, sandblaster type feeling, and I just stayed tucked in, I was being knocked around. I saw, you know, a few flashes of light from being knocked in the head. I just remember saying, you know, 'I can't believe this is how, my God, I can't believe this is how I'm gonna die.'

"I thought about my wife, my unborn child ... and, you know, I said, 'Please, just God, please take care of them, and make it a quick death,'" Buzzelli said.

In his survival, Buzzelli said he has a second chance at life and wants to be the best person he can be. But he also is devastated over the loss of life. He lost 14 of his colleagues that day...they just happened to be the last ones he saw before the building collapsed. God, as they say, was with Mr. Buzzelli that day...what is God saying to us today, 20 years later though?

Like all of you who are old enough to have been around on that day...I remember just where I was and what I was doing when I got the news.

I happened to be on a roof of a fellow pastor that morning. It was a beautiful morning and my secretary's husband, a few others, and myself were up on the pastor's roof getting ready to put a new roof on their home. The pastor was a part time pastor and he had been seriously injured in a mine accident a few years ago...it turns out my secretary's husband had worked with him and had been his friend for years. When it became known that they needed a new roof but could not afford to hire anyone the secretary's husband, who is a wonderful fellow and a very talented one at that, decided to get some others and we would put the new roof on their home. We had been tearing off some shingles when my phone rang and it was our church secretary and she told me about the planes hitting the Towers. At first I thought, so...that is a tragic thing but why call me about it...and then she said, "They are almost certain it was a deliberate act of terrorism." And as we talked we realized the church needed to be prepared for a service that evening and available as a place of prayer. So, I made my apologies and headed to the church...I also had a

hair appointment that morning with a church member...and as she cut my hair we watched the news as it unfolded.

It also just so happens we had a family whose son and brother was an army officer and happened to be stationed at the Pentagon. As I arrived at the church and was listening to the news we found out a plane had hit the Pentagon and had done a lot of damage. We immediately thought of the family whose son was there and began to pray and made contact with them, not wanting to talk to long so they could keep their phone lines open.

That evening...the family had finally heard from their son, he was fine. And we all gathered in the church for a time of prayer, reflection, shared thoughts, and more prayer. One thing I did not hear that evening...was anger or a call for revenge. We may have been different than other gatherings...I don't know...but for us on that evening the bigger worry was to be concerned for all the emergency responders and the folks and their families who were involved in the terrorism.

By the way...There is nothing wrong with feeling anger...we talked about that a few weeks ago. Remember in Ephesians it says, "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." And in James it says, "Be slow to anger." But it doesn't say, NEVER GET ANGRY.

AS you know almost 3,000 people died on 9/11, another 25,000 were injured, and many, many others suffered long-term health problems. 9/11 still stands as the deadliest terrorist attack in recent history.

Just a few weeks after the attacks the U.S. launched a War on Terror and invaded Afghanistan to overthrow the Taliban. This group had been protecting al-Qaeda terrorists and refusing to hand over Osama bin Laden, who took responsibility for the attacks. After 10 long years, bin Laden was located in Pakistan and killed in a U.S. raid. And as you know we just recently pulled the last of our troops out of Afghanistan and I think it's

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safe to say not everyone thinks our time there was a success that will last as now the Taliban has once again taken over to rule much of Afghanistan.

For my generation and others as well...9/11 was much like the bombing of Pearl Harbor, in that it drew Americans together in the face of a common enemy. The motto "United We Stand" appeared everywhere. Flags were flown, and churches were packed. Muslim organizations quickly condemned the attacks, and President Bush made an appearance at an Islamic Center in Washington, D.C. He spoke of the valuable contributions that Muslims made to the United States every day, and called for them to be treated with respect. Partisan differences were put aside, and the government restructured itself in a number of ways, including the creation of the Department of Homeland Security.

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September 11 was a day of horror, but it did for at least a time pull Americans together in a beautiful way.

The prophet Isaiah has words that are appropriate for this anniversary. They not only take us back to 2001, but they point us to the future and lay a challenge before us. "The Lord God helps me," says Isaiah; "therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame" (Isaiah 50:7). These words matched the attitude of our country in the days after 9/11. We turned to God for help, and we found that God upheld us. We showed unity and resolve, setting our faces "like flint" on the challenges of national security and respect for our brothers and sisters.

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We were not disgraced, and for that we can be thankful. But the challenges of 2001 are not behind us. If anything, they are bigger than ever.

"Who will contend with me?" asks Isaiah (v. 8). After 9/11, the answer was al-Qaeda. But today, one of our greatest threats is domestic terrorism. The people who attacked our Capitol earlier this year were extremists from our own country.

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The challenge before us, 20 years after 9/11, is to “stand up together” (v. 8). We need to face our challenges as united Christians alongside other people of faith in a truly United States of America. But how do we do this? How do we overcome our polarization and stand together again, as we did after September 11, 2001?

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It seems we need to understand what our mission in the world is. The prophet Isaiah is talking about a servant most of us understand as none other than our Savior Jesus when he says, “The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher” (v. 4). And exactly who is this servant-teacher? Isaiah thought that Israel itself was God’s servant. Later, members of the Christian church saw Jesus as the servant in these words. In either case, the role of the servant is not to be a master who rules but a servant who teaches.

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If we are going to follow Jesus, then we need to be such servants as well. As servants of God, we are to be teachers of grace and truth and justice. We are to treat others as we want to be treated, and to see everyone as a child of God, made in the image and likeness of God. We are to lift people up, not knock them down. Help them, not hurt them. Love them, not hate them.

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That’s our mission, according to Isaiah: To teach God’s ways and to “sustain the weary with a word.” To serve a world in need, to encourage the people around us, and to develop relationships that are respectful and honest and open. Islamic and all other extremists reach out to people who are feeling angry, vulnerable and isolated, so our job is to make connections with the least of our brothers and sisters. Isaiah says that God wakens the servant’s ear “to listen as those who are taught” (v. 4), meaning that we servants of God have a lot to learn by **listening**.

The translation of this line offered by Bible scholar Brevard Childs is interesting as it says: “he wakens my ear to listen like disciples” (v. 4). To “listen like disciples” is the challenge for each of us, isn’t it? Listen to what Jesus is saying to each of us. Listen to what God is saying to us. Listen to what Muslims and Jews and people of other faiths are saying to us.

Our job is to teach and listen and learn, as we grow into servants of God who are nothing less than “a light to the nations” (49:6). That’s our God-given mission in the world.

Next, we are challenged to cooperate with God. “The Lord God has opened my ear,” says the servant in Isaiah, “and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward” (50:5). God is calling us into a better future, and our challenge is to follow where God is leading. One preacher, the Rev. Peter Marty says he tries to preach sermons that help individuals to “meet God or be met by God.” He tries to say things that “reveal Christ’s presence in the world.” He believes we preachers should avoid any appearance of lining up with any political ideals or groups.

But there is a problem, according to Marty: “Many Christians now interpret faith through the prism of their political ideology.” It’s true for Christians on the right and on the left. And this approach seems to be the opposite of what Isaiah recommends. Our challenge is to let the Lord God open our ears, and not rebel against God when we hear a challenging word. In a world of partisan politics, our goal should be to cooperate with God and move forward in God’s way.

According to the Journal of Homiletics this week if we understand our mission and cooperate with God, then we will make an amazing discovery: God will help us. The prophet Isaiah knew this, which is why he said, “The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced” (v. 7). In the face of any hardship, Isaiah was able to keep moving forward, because the

Lord was offering assistance. The God “who vindicates me is near,” said Isaiah. “Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together” (v. 8). Such words were inspiring in the aftermath of 9/11, and they can be helpful to us today. We are always stronger as a community than we are as isolated individuals, so the challenge for us is to trust God and stand up together.

We can do this by refusing to fall victim to fear. The command “Do not be afraid,” along with the closely related phrase “Have no fear,” is one of the most repeated phrases in the Bible. It appears about 80 times throughout the Old and New Testaments. This command is grounded not in wishful thinking, but in the conviction that Almighty God is willing to fight for us – if we allow it.

Yes, God will fight for us when we are battling illness in body, mind or spirit. God will help us when we are feeling lonely, overwhelmed or confused. God will assist us in the face of any difficulty, and God often does this through members of the church, the body of Christ. It is in the Christian community that we are best able to stand up together.

But we also take a stand for God when we build bridges in the wider community. After four decades in the Marine Corps, General James Mattis says that our internal divisiveness is often more threatening than our external enemies. Our focus should be on “rediscovering our common ground and finding solutions.” God will help us with this, if we allow it.

In 1991, George H.W. Bush gave a speech at the 50th anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. You probably know this but President Bush was a young man when Pearl Harbor was attacked and he immediately joined the armed services and joined the war effort. And in 1944 near the island of Chichi Jima, George Bush was shot down by the Japanese. He was the only one on his plane to evade capture and to live to tell the story. So...if anyone had a reason to really HATE the Japanese it would have been him. But in 1991 in a speech prepared by speechwriter Mary Kate Grant, that is still to my knowledge played today, President George H.W. Bush said, “Well, let me tell you how I feel. I have no rancor in my heart toward

Germany or Japan – none at all. And I hope, in spite of the loss, that you have none in yours. This is no time for recrimination. World War II is over. It is history. We won. We crushed totalitarianism – and when that was done, we helped our enemies give birth to democracies. We made our enemies our friends...”

It is interesting to me that a theme heard in several areas this year has been that we are better when we are together. Jack Johnson wrote these lyrics several years ago in a song with the title, “Better When We’re Together”

... There's no combination of words I could put on the back of a postcard
No song that I could sing, but I can try for your heart
Our dreams, and they are made out of real things
Like a shoe box of photographs
With sepia-toned loving
Love is the answer, at least for most of the questions in my heart
Like why are we here? And where do we go?
And how come it's so hard?
It's not always easy and
Sometimes life can be deceiving
I'll tell you one thing, it's always better when we're together.”

September 11, 2001 was 20 years ago. A tragedy...a terrorist attack that should never be glossed over and it's victims forgotten...in the aftermath of that tragedy we as a country and with a LARGE part of our world all came together. Today, I still believe that is how we should be...as Isaiah said, and Jesus, our suffering servant relates, It is better...my friends, when we are together! Amen.

And we all know what resentment and anger can do to us. We have all experienced times when we simply could not let go of our anger...and then felt the implications of what that meant to us and to those with whom we were angry.

During the time when Leonardo was working on his famous painting, The Last Supper, he became angry with an acquaintance of his. The two men

had words, and parted from each other on very bad terms. Leonardo returned to the church on whose wall he was painting the fresco.

It was no use. Leonardo could paint nothing he was happy with. It just so happened that he had reached the point in the project where he was doing the face of Jesus. Time and again he tried to render a passable likeness of the Lord, but he was unable to do so.

Finally the great artist realized he had work to do, but it was not in the church he had been commissioned to decorate. Leonardo put down his brushes and palette, and sought out the man who had been the subject of his wrath. He asked the man's forgiveness. The man accepted his apology and offered an apology of his own.

It was only then that Leonardo was able to return to the church and finish painting the face of Jesus.¹

¹ I based this sermon on one I read in the Journal of Homiletics, September-October 2021 edition. Contributed by Carlos Wilton and Henry Brinton.