The prophet Isaiah offers 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 aid for our brothers and sisters. 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). What the prophet means is, “Who will stand with me against the evil in the world?” The challenge before us, 20 years after 9/11, is to “stand up together” (v. 8), to face our challenges as united Christians and citizens standing alongside other people of faith in a truly United States of America. But how do we do this? How do we overcome the current climate of polarization and once again stand up together?

The first step is to ***grasp our mission in the world***. Isaiah speaks of a servant when he says, “The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher” (v. 4). Isaiah thought that Israel itself was God’s servant, doing God’s will and setting an example to the world. Christians see 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. As servants of God, we are called to be teachers of grace and truth and justice. We are to treat others as they deserve 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. In all that we say, we must have the tongue of a teacher, that we “may know how to sustain the weary with a word” (v. 4).

According to Isaiah, our mission is to “sustain the weary with a word” by serving a world in need, encouraging the people around us, and developing relationships that are respectful and honest and open. Extremists succeed because they connect with people who are feeling angry, vulnerable, and isolated. Our task is to make connections and build relationships so that all people feel loved, respected, and included in the community. 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.

Listening is a good start, but the translation of this verse offered by the great Bible scholar Brevard Childs is even better: “[God] wakens my ear to listen *like disciples*” (v. 4). To “listen like disciples” is challenging work! We must listen, hear, and take to heart what Jesus is saying to each of us about our worth in God’s eyes. We must listen, hear, and take to heart what our neighbors are saying to us about their hopes and needs. We must listen, hear, and take to heart what people of other faiths and cultures are saying to us which might inform our own faith and action. We are 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 is our God-given mission in the world.

To be this “light to the world,” Isaiah challenges us 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 calls us into a better future, and our challenge is to follow where God leads. We rebel when we turn from God and follow other voices.

And those other voices are loud, and they are numerous. We live in a time of deep political polarization. We monitor everything we say because others are quick to assign a political motive to every word. We get criticized for saying too much or too little about Black Lives Matter, or about the Capitol invasion, or about environmental issues. We get defensive or belligerent if someone offers a differing viewpoint about the presidencies of Donald Trump and Joe Biden, or about the response to the pandemic, or about the situation in Afghanistan. We cherish being right on the “issue” more than we cherish being right with one another.

This is a disturbing and a destructive problem, according to Pastor Peter Marty: “Many Christians now interpret faith through the prism of their political ideology.” It is true for Christians on the right and on the left, and this approach is the opposite of what Isaiah recommends. Isaiah’s challenge is to let the Lord God open our ears, and not to rebel against God when we hear a challenging word. In a world of partisan rhetoric that divides us, we are called to cooperate with God, moving forward in ways which unite us.

If we understand our mission and cooperate with God, then we will make an amazing discovery: ***God will help us****.* 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 every hardship, God helped Isaiah to keep moving forward. 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 appearing 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.

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. “We are dividing into hostile tribes,” says retired General Jim Mattis. After four decades in the Marine Corps, Mattis knows that our internal divisiveness is often more threatening than our external enemies. Our focus should be on “rediscovering our common ground and finding solutions,” says Mattis. God will help us with this if we allow it.

We can use this anniversary of 9/11 to grasp our mission in the world, cooperate with God, and trust God to help us. Twenty years ago, the motto was “United We Stand.” But now, more than ever, is the time to stand up together.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help me listen to you, so that, like Jesus, I can be a blessing to those around me. Amen.

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**Let Us Stand Up Together**

Sunday, September 12, 2021 Isaiah 50:4-9a

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

“From that day onward, life would never be the same again. In the days after the disaster, life seemed to lose some of its luster. Many residents of the city spoke of a loss of innocence that would never return. The smoky haze, rising from fires still not extinguished, made the sunsets more brilliant. But it also served as an aching reminder of all the people they had lost, in that one dreadful day.”

That may sound like a reminder of the tragic events on September 11, 2001, when four hijacked planes slammed into the World Trade Center towers, the Pentagon, and a Pennsylvania field. On this twentieth anniversary of that horrible day, we remember the 3,000 people who lost their lives and of how our country and our world changed forever.

But this was not about 9/11. This described the day the armies of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, burst through the gates of Jerusalem (597 BC) and ended the royal line of David and Solomon. The invaders packed Jehoiachin, the boy king, off to Babylon, along with his family, the members of the royal court, and 10,000 captives. None would ever see Jerusalem again. The conquerors burned Solomon’s wondrous temple and pulled Jerusalem’s walls to the ground. Nebuchadnezzar set up a puppet king, and Babylonian administrators moved into every civil-service job of any importance.

For Israel, the chosen people whom the Lord had led through the wilderness, this was an unexpected and humiliating defeat. But it also represented a spiritual crisis: they questioned where God was and wondered if life would never be the same again.

We asked those same questions after 9/11. But, like the Israelites, we can choose how we remember our “dreadful day.” We can remember it as a day of hatred, or we can remember it as a day of love. The 9/11 terrorists thought they were pulling down the most imposing symbol of American capitalism, but they failed. For the stories and images we continue to call to mind, years later, are not so much those of collapsing buildings and twisted steel, but the simple love of one person for another. We discovered that we find our well-being not in nurturing hatred but in looking to the needs of one another.