

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, ‘Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.’ And Simon answered, ‘Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.’”

God doesn't trick people. He doesn't use the old bait and switch method either where you lure somebody in and then once you've got them you pull the old “gotcha” and change it up so that what they thought they were getting has become something else. That's not what God does because that is lying and deceives people. God doesn't trick people.

What God does is catch them. The Lord catches people and pulls them in like fish in a net pulled into the boat against their will. The reason why God does this is because this is how he saves us whose wills are opposed to him. Sinners would rather be swimming in the opposite direction going content along their happy way rather than be caught in a net. God knows this and he knows it all too well. So, God throws out his net and works a miracle. He brings in fish who otherwise would be swimming against his boat and gives them a new place in which to dwell. When he does this death occurs, a fish out of water dies and a sinner who has been caught and dragged out of the fallen world dies. God though gives new life. He gives a new heart, a right spirit, and breathes into the person the breath of life. God doesn't trick people he saves people.

That's what you see in the Gospel reading today as the people gathered around to hear God's word. St. Luke tells us, “On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.”

Simon learned this work of God firsthand as the Lord called out to him to let down his nets. Simon is the fisherman, yet this stranger tells him how to fish. He knows how things must be done in the real world. He knows what works and how to get fish. But how was that working for him this past night? “And Simon answered, ‘Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.’” Instead of relying on his own experience and efforts he listened to the word of Jesus and followed as he directed. And what happened? “And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink.” God provided and he provided in abundance. He worked a miracle according to the means he told Simon would be the case. God was in charge, and he was working according to how he said he would do things.

But I mean, is that it? But what if Peter didn't want it to be this way? What Jesus said is so ordinary and not exciting. It sounds so foolish. God calls us to trust his word? God works through his word read, taught, and preached? What if I don't want that to be the case. What if I want something else, something different, something more enticing? I think my kids, my neighbors, my grandkids, this doesn't appeal to them, they don't like this we need to try something else. We need to search and find something more appealing, more relevant, more, well more like we want it to be. Remember, though, God doesn't trick people. God doesn't play the game of thinking he has to sell himself to appeal to you. Remember God catches people, and he is the one who kills to make alive. He doesn't answer to man, and man is not his counselor. God's ways are not our ways, and his thoughts are not our thoughts.

Trusting God's word doesn't come by our own reason or strength. Since the fall into sin, we've lost that aspect of God's image where we trust and love God completely. In fact, it's quite the opposite. Our ways, our methods, and our wisdom we may concoct for ourselves we like to think are good and true. That's where God's law breaks us like a hammer. It calls us to look outside of ourselves and see that to seek our own thoughts and ways and turn from God's word is the real foolishness and leads to death. God calls us, instead, to completely trust and depend on what God says to us in the Holy Scriptures for they are the words of eternal life and will endure forever.

It's God, then, who speaks and works this faith to turn us toward him and trust this word. In the reading today Simon spoke great words of faith. Listen again to what Luke recorded, "And Simon answered, 'Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.'" The miracle of so many fish pointed Simon to Jesus who spoke those words to him and worked this great catch of fish he and his partners were unable to achieve. Jesus was teaching them and us something in this whole encounter. It's no wonder how Simon Peter responded, "But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.'"

The church is brought about by the word of God. Without God's word there is no church. The command of Jesus to "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch" is a call for the word of God to be preached faithfully and fully in the deepest depths of this world. This is how God works. The frustrating thing for us is that it takes the work out of our hands. Our responsibility is to preach this word and confess this faith but to create faith and grow the church, well that's what God does. He is the one who does it.

It's frustrating too because we look around and we see rejection. We see people in our lives, our dear loved ones, who don't want to listen to God's word or who want God's word to be changed to be more palpable to our ears in the world today. We are frustrated because we think, if we just relaxed or gloss over things like living together before marriage, homosexuality, the roles of men and women, closed communion, then maybe more people would be in the pews. Maybe more people would be "hearing about Jesus" and then we rationalize and think that's what really matters in the end. That, however, is the old heresy called gospel reductionism which tries to set Jesus against the word of God. When you do this, the Jesus you end up with is not the Jesus we see in our reading, it's a false Jesus, a false god made in our image.

Listen, though, to what God says. "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.' Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe." If God's word offends us, if the cross offends us, the problem lies not with God but with us.

God doesn't trick people. God catches people. God kills to make alive. God has caught you; he has redeemed you. Jesus himself said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day." God has claimed you as his own. He has given you a new life. And this is who you are, then, in the church of God. One of the ancient greetings of Christians in the early church, especially in areas of persecution, was to draw in the dirt part of a fish and then the other person, if he was a Christian, would complete the picture. The fish is an ancient symbol for being a Christian because God has caught you and brought you into the ship, the church. One of the words for fish in Greek also is an acrostic creed meaning "Jesus Christ, God's Son, [the] Savior."

So, what does this all mean? You are to be content and find peace in God's word. Even if God is stretching, testing, and giving you crosses to bear because of being faithful to his word, you do so as people who have his word and are called by name in the waters of Holy Baptism. That means everything. Jesus called the apostles to be fishers of men. You don't have that same call and vocation but you as the church have that same word of God given to you. God calls you to be hearers of his word and he calls his church to proclaim this word and be faithful. The nets go out as the word is preached. The consolation and peace come when you stop worrying about things and start trusting those promises of God made to you in Christ. It's when you have the heart of Peter in the reading when he says, "at your word" and Mary when Gabriel visited her, "let it be to me according to your word." For you together as the church this promise is that not even the gates of hell shall prevail against the church, against you. Does this mean the church won't get smaller in this world? No, it doesn't mean that. Nor does it mean that numerical growth will occur when you want it to happen. Simon, James, and John toiled all night, remember? It was only after they had God's word did, they have the great catch of fish.

You are called to be faithful, to fight the good fight of faith, to be a city on a hill, to be salt and light in the world. You are called always to confess the faith and in all places. God does call you to do that and to be prepared to give a reason for the hope you have. You need to know the Scriptures and there's no excuse to not be hearing the word of God and reading his word. It doesn't depend on you. Yet, you are not burdened to preserve the church. She is the bride of Christ, and he has bought her with the price of his own blood. He has ransomed you and he will guard and keep you safe in his arms even unto life everlasting. Your sin is forgiven and you have eternal life. Jesus came for this purpose, and he came for the purpose of preaching. Earlier in Luke's Gospel, in 4:43 which is the previous chapter, Jesus said, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose." Jesus preaches to you. The Lord will take care of his people, and he will take care of you. Rest easy in those words of God.

Your Lord is Jesus who worked that miraculous catch of fish for these fishermen. He is the Lord who in John 6 said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day." There is similar fishing language in that passage as Jesus has dragged you into the ark of the church like a fisherman drags a net full of fish onto a boat. His net, his word, has caught you. Your Lord has done this for you, and he promises he will not let you go. Though the boat be tossed by the seas Jesus promises you the other side is near. The church suffers and bears the cross in this world, but Jesus the Lord is crucified, he is risen. Jesus sharpens you in this life as the church. Through these times you learn to trust more clearly and firmly that word. When you see that you have toiled all night and have caught nothing, the Lord answers your prayers with "listen to my word and have life." The voice of faith is the confession of "at your word" spoken by Simon Peter and echoes from other great saints of the Bible such as Mary who said to the angel, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." God did not put them to shame, and neither will you be put to shame.

Each day repent of your sin and look to Christ who has redeemed you. Rest in his word that promises you have eternal life. Find solace in the church that is eternal and will not be overcome. When times of trial and hardship come and everything seems hopeless, cling even more to the Lord who is your anchor and keeps you from being tossed here and there by all passing fads and false teachings itching ears want to hear. Look to the horizon too and know what is coming. The Lord is returning and will take you to himself. On that day the toil will be gone. All doubts and struggles will be gone. All sin will be gone. All death will be gone. That day will be glorious day without compare when the fishing and work is over and it's time to eat at the feast forever.

"The let us follow Christ, our Lord, and take the cross appointed and, firmly clinging to his word, in suffering be undaunted. For those who bear the battle strain the crown of heavenly life obtain."

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.