

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

This week it was my privilege again to lead the devotions at LSUS. Normally, there is a catechetical theme, and this week we began the Ten Commandments. I talked about the First and Second Commandments. You remember them, the First: “You shall have no other gods.” What does this mean? “We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” And the Second: “You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.” What does this mean? “We should fear and love God so that we do not curse, swear, use satanic arts, lie, or deceive by His name, but call upon it in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks.”

All of Luther’s explanations talk about fearing and loving God. I remember in the past some pastors acting as if they were ashamed to teach the fear of God — at least, that’s the way it came across to me. They tried to explain it away, saying “fear” here really meant “awe”. But that’s not Luther’s own explanation. With Luther, the contrast between fear and love was the contrast between threat and promise.

And indeed, the threats are explicit: “*for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me*” (Ex. 20:5), and “*the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain*” (Ex. 20:7), and in the New Testament too, “*we know him who said, ‘Vengeance is mine; I will repay.’ And again, ‘The Lord will judge his people.’ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*” (Heb. 10:31). Jesus, likewise, taught us to “*fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell*” (Matt. 10:28).

Do we think of God as being tame? Safe? If you read C. S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, or saw the movie, you might remember the scene where the children find out from the Beaver that Aslan, Narnia’s savior, is a lion. Susan replied, “‘Ooh’ ... ‘I’d thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion’ ... ‘Safe?’ said Mr. Beaver ... ‘Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.’” There is good reason to fear: we are sinners before a holy God. Lewis was right: God is not safe. The Lion was not tame. But He is good.

So, we get to our texts today. We first encounter Isaiah, who in a vision comes into the presence of the Lord. The seraphim proclaimed the Lord, “*Holy, holy, holy*” and declared “*the whole earth is full of his glory!*” Our text doesn’t say this, but I picture Isaiah on his knees, crying out in fear, “*Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!*” And he was right to react that way, for we admit as we pray for forgiveness, “we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment.” And we acknowledge in Luther’s Close of the

Commandments: “God threatens to punish all who break [His] commandments. Therefore, we should fear His wrath and not do anything against them.”

Similarly, in our Gospel text, Jesus meets up with Simon Peter who had been fishing all night with little success. Jesus gets in the boat, and for a while preaches from it. But then He tells Peter to go out into deeper water and let the nets down. Peter does, and miraculously, the nets are filled. In this sign, Peter recognizes Jesus for who He is, and himself for the unworthy sinner he is. Falling down before Jesus, therefore, Peter said, *“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”* Peter was right, too, his fear was appropriate, for apart from grace, who could stand? *“If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared”* (Ps. 130:3-4).

Isaiah was a dead man, for his eyes had seen God, and the Lord had said *“man shall not see me and live”* (Ex. 33:20). Peter sought to send Jesus away for he was “by nature sinful and unclean. [He had] sinned against [God] in thought, word, and deed, by what [he had] done and by what [he had] left undone.” He knew he “justly deserve[d] [God’s] present and eternal punishment.”

Yet, God, taking the initiative bestows His grace. One of the Lord’s angels took *“a burning coal”* and *“touched [Isaiah’s] mouth”* with it *“and said: ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.’”* And the Lord Jesus Himself said to Peter, *“Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.”* The Lord heard their *“pleas for mercy.”* They had put their trust in the Lord, in whom *“there is steadfast love, and ... plentiful redemption.”* They trusted in Him who redeems from iniquities (Ps. 130:7-8).

Today Jesus Himself gives us an occasion to consider this redemption with this miraculous catch of fish. For although Peter learns through this miracle just who Jesus is, through the miracle Jesus also taught Peter that the great work of the Church would be to “catch men” and bring them into His kingdom.

What follows here is modified and adapted a bit from what our District President wrote this week about this text. It’s a bit of an allegorical interpretation, but I thought it so good, that I’m using it here.

Imagine yourself a fish living in waters so polluted with misery that you cannot breathe. You are unable to do anything to extricate yourself. There is violence and death within and without. But a net descends, lowered by a benevolent Being, and you are drawn out of your breathless, helpless, violent, and dying realm into waters where you can breathe, even though you have never known what this is like; where you are able to move freely, even though you have never known this before; where you are treated with love and kindness, even though you have never really realized this before; where, though it seems

impossible, you will not die forever, but you will live into eternity. You have been caught in the net of Christ, the net cast by Christ through His Church. You have been brought by water and word into the kingdom of God, a realm that has never even been imagined by sinful man, a realm that gives one meaning and purpose.

Is there such a net and a kingdom to which we can be caught and carried? Indeed! That is why the Son of God became flesh, a fish tossed down from heaven into our helpless and violent realm, caught up in mankind's net of mischief, misery, and malevolence. And being thus caught in this nasty net He would mercilessly be murdered, made breathless, and be caught and carried into the realm of the dead. This fabulous fish, the Lord Jesus Christ, would burst forth from the heretofore never escaped realm of the dead, for no net or realm could hold Him. Unbeknownst to the world, both His death and His resurrection were His purpose and goal, for from these He would create not only the saving net of the Gospel, but also the wondrous realm into which people can be caught and carried.

This net of the Gospel is wondrously woven The nailing of Jesus to the cross, like the nailing of a fish to a board to be scaled and butchered, becomes the part of the weave of the net of the Gospel, for at the cross the mischief, malevolence, and all sins of man were atoned for. And His glorious resurrection, guaranteeing justification and life eternal, becomes another part of this net's weave. So powerfully are these two acts of Jesus woven together that this net is rendered unbreakable and capable of catching and carrying millions out of this veil of tears. This Gospel net has now become the power of God unto salvation. It is the net of the Word of Christ's death and resurrection, the net that can and does catch and carry fallen fishy people into the realm created by Christ's two awesome acts.

Dear saints, as our text shows and Dr. Brege illustrated, God is good. He acts on our behalf with grace in Christ Jesus; and we have His promise. Trust it. Yet, He is not safe. The threats are real for sinners, too. Therefore, God grant that we may "fear, love, and trust in Him above all things." Yes, God grant that we may "love the LORD [our] God with all [our] heart and with all [our] soul and with all [our] might" (Deut. 6:5).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.