When I was growing up, my dad would take us out fishing on a lake in Wisconsin. As little kids we had a worm on a hook at an end of a cane pole catching sunfish. Then we graduated to a rod and reel casting a Daredevil. And finally worked our way up to throwing Suicks trying to catch an elusive muskie. In my experience fishing meant bait and hooks.

If that had been what fishing was in Jesus’ day, I wonder whether he would have referred to his gospel work as fishing for people. Bait and hook is not a good picture of the gospel. But as you heard in the text, Simon Peter and Andrew were casting a net. James and John were preparing their nets. That is how they fished in Jesus’ day - with nets.

A net surrounds the fish and draws it in - no deceptive bait, no damaging hook. So also the Good News of Jesus draws us closer and closer to him. The Good News of the kingdom draws us to Jesus as we believe it with repentant hearts. And then we in turn can cast the net as we share the Good News to bring others near to Jesus. Let's focus on that theme then: **THE GOOD NEWS OF THE KINGDOM DRAWS PEOPLE TO JESUS.** Believe it with a repentant heart. Share it to bring others near.

Our text begins: **After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, The time has come, he said. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!** Notice the emphasis that this message is good news. That's what the word **Gospel** means - good news. Yet so often we fail to appreciate, value and cherish it as the good news it is.

Sometimes this comes from a misunderstanding. So many have twisted those words **repent** and **The kingdom of God is near** into anything but good news. Their message comes across like this: **You better shape up. You better get your life in order. God's kingdom is coming and he is going to clean house. If you don't fall in line, he is going to throw you out. You better repent or else.** And by repent they mean to do some act of sorrow or amends on our part to try and appease God.

To me that sounds like a bait and hook kind of fishing. They hold out the promise of something better – that is the bait. But only if we do our part – that is the hook. You see, **our part** becomes some list of rules and regulations, often varying from church to church, but all claiming that theirs is from the Bible. Like a hook they pierce the conscience with guilt and then jerk people around in whatever direction the current church leadership wants to drag them. That has turned off many people from organized religion, and rightly so. That was not the kind of fishing Jesus did.

But here, dear friends, we must confess our own failing. It is so easy for you and me to take so much of what the Bible says and choose to understand it in a way that fails to see God's love and mercy at work. Do we look to him as the God of good news or as the God who punishes us? The Flood, the Plagues, the victories of the enemies - these were judgments from God. They were punishments against those who had turned away from him. But toward his people even these disasters and calamities were acts of love, kindness and mercy. Do you see that when you read the Scriptures?

Do we see that in our own lives? When we face loss, hardship, tragedy, or disaster, do we question about God's fairness? Do we wonder what sin he is now punishing us for? Do we imagine that he has given up on us? Or do we run to him as the one who alone is always faithful and true, always merciful and kind, always caring and compassionate? Do we run to him as the God of good news, even when everything around us is bad news? That is faith. Faith runs to God. Faith believes the good news even as life goes from bad
to worse. Like a net, the Good News draws us to Jesus, our Savior and God.

But often the Good News does not seem to have much of an effect on us. That is one reason why so many churches resort to other things to get people to do the right thing. Good news should change people. Think if you were on your death bed with only a few hours left. Suddenly the doctor bursts into the room, shouting: **We have found the cure! With this one shot, you will recover and live another 20 healthy, productive years.** What joy, not only for you but for all your family and friends! How that good news would change your life!

On the other hand, if after church today one of you came to me and said: **Pastor, with this one shot you will recover and not die today. You could live another 20 years.** I think I would say: That sounds like good news but I am not sick. I do not need a shot. And I probably have a good chance of living another 20 years without it. That news would not be life changing for me, even if unknown to me I was deathly sick.

You see, dear friends, our failure to appreciate, value and cherish the Good News of Jesus does not only happen when we misunderstand it but also when we fail to see how much we need it. That is why the Bible tells us of God's justice against sin: the Flood, the Plagues, the victories of the enemies. See how serious sin is, how deadly serious! That is why the Bible confronts each of us with our own sinfulness - that fatal disease of the soul. When we rightly see our own guilt, we no longer ask why bad things happen to good people. Rather with our own sinfulness exposed the question is: Why don't worse things happen to all of us, especially me? Look at the sinner I am!

Then what good news that the kingdom of God is near! What good news that your King, Jesus Christ, has come in flesh and blood. That is how near he is! He became one of us to rescue you and me! The kingdom of God is near! What good news that he exchanged his crown of glory to wear a crown of thorns for us! He covered himself in the filthy rags of our sinfulness to die in our place so that we wear his glorious robe of righteousness. The kingdom of God is near! What good news that our King conquered Satan for us, parading through hell in victory. What good news that our King conquered death for us, rising from the grave. What good news that your King is still near. He comes to you in his Word. He brings you his body and blood in the Sacrament. Through the Gospel he reigns in your heart. What good news that nothing can separate you from his love, for he is King over all.

Believe this good news, believe it with a repentant heart, a heart that sees how much you need Jesus. A repentant heart sees how much you and I need our Savior from sin and death. Without him we are lost forever, but with him we are heirs of heaven. Only a repentant heart appreciates, values, cherishes and treasures just how good this news of Jesus is. Like a net, the good news of the kingdom draws us ever closer to Jesus.

And good news is certainly news to share. You see, this good news does not just add 20 years to your life. It brings eternal life to all who believe.

Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James and John to fish for people. They and the other apostles would share the good news of Jesus in a most unique way. They were eyewitnesses of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. They could personally testify of what they had heard and seen. What is more God used several of them to record the testimony as the Holy Spirit guided and directed them, giving them the exact words. The New Testament is this written, Spirit-inspired testimony of the apostles.

But the way the apostles shared the good news of Jesus is not the only way to cast
the Gospel net and fish for people. Still today the Lord sends out pastors, missionaries, teachers, staff ministers and others to do the work of the church on behalf of those who have called them. I just read that there are about 100 pastoral vacancies in our synod. Is there someone you could encourage to become a pastor? Might you consider serving someone way yourself? We cast out the net and fish for people as we support the work of our called workers with our prayers, offerings and encouragements.

But the Gospel-net is not just given to pastors and teachers, is it? Each of you has the Gospel-net. Share the Good News to bring others near to Jesus. Often that starts with an act of kindness, letting the love of Christ shine out from you. But no one can know Jesus if they only know our acts of kindness. Invite them to come and see the one who is so important to you. Let them know that church is not just something you do on Sunday morning, but rather here you get to meet the one who is so important to you. Here his Kingdom is near. Here your King comes to you in his Word and Sacrament and you get to respond with praise and thanks. Invite others to come and see your King. Share that Good News to bring others near to Jesus.

Whether you care to go to the lake with a rod and reel or not, remember this is fishing that you can do anywhere. It is not with bait and a hook but with the net of the Gospel. It is the same net that has already drawn you near to Jesus, for you believe his Good News with a repentant heart. Now like a fisherman, cast that net out to draw others into the kingdom. Share the Good News of Jesus. Amen.

Pastor Keith Bilitz
St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Alma City
Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church, Smiths Mill