*That they may have life*by Bishop Chad W. Zielinski

*Christ’s birth brings hope and healing*

We all have our favorite scriptures or scenes from the Gospel. One of the most powerful for me comes at the end of John, when after the Resurrection, Jesus finds Peter fishing. I’m sure part of the connection comes from growing up around Lake Huron in Michigan and enjoying a lot of fishing. I also know how hard it is to fish to feed your family, having witnessed during the time I served as bishop of Fairbanks, Native Alaskans along the Yukon River haul in salmon for days to put away for winter.

I find it amazing that after Jesus rose from the dead, the disciples were confused about their mission. Jesus had already appeared to them twice, but they still returned to their familiar livelihood of fishing but catching nothing. Yet, Jesus remains present amidst this confusion and fruitless work. He gives the disciples simple instructions – “toss the net over the other side of the boat” – that produces in abundance.

Peter no doubt wanted to keep Christ at a distance, ashamed of having denied him three times. But Jesus looks at him man-to-man, piercing his soul with a forgiving and hopeful gaze. He invites Peter to embrace his capacity for goodness with a simple question: “Do you love me?” Each question penetrates Peter’s wounds and reveals his feelings of unworthiness. He could have again said, “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” But Peter is instead empowered by the Risen Christ to lead God’s people, having just encountered his enormous capacity to love.

In this Gospel scene, Jesus demonstrates his unrelenting desire to be close to Peter and all of us. Every Christmas, we are reminded that God desires to be so close to us that he “became flesh and dwelt among us” *(John 1:14)*. Christ draws near to us even now, especially in the sacraments and above all, in the Eucharist, where we truly encounter him and are transformed.

The marvelous truth of the Eucharist is that in choosing to commune with us, Christ announces the goodness of God’s sacred design etched into our very being. Christmas is an invitation to draw closer to Christ, embrace him, be transformed, and help others recognize their capacity to love because goodness lives within us. You see this especially at Christmas when even non-religious people desire to be generous and kind to others.

**God is always crying out his love if we have ears to hear**

Once while at seminary, I headed to the city for a few Christmas gifts. I approached the bank ATM (not everyone had a credit card in those days) and was chagrined to see a long line of people. Ahead of me in line was a young man wearing blue jeans, a denim jacket, and chains hanging from his clothing. It was the “punk rock” era, so his hair was shaved on the sides, spiked on top, and he sported an array of colors. I mentally sized him up, negatively thinking that nothing about his appearance reflected the Christmas spirit.

Then a man in a car decided he would drive up and try to cut in front of all the other bank patrons. You could see the irritation in people who had waited patiently for their turn.

Within a few seconds, the “punk rocker” spoke up loudly for all to hear: “I don’t think Santa is going to bring him anything this year.”

I wanted to yell, “You go, punk rock guy! Tell him like it is!” Then I realized I had completely misjudged the man. Despite his appearance, he had demonstrated a keen sense of justice on behalf of us all.

This experience in the 1980s expressed that instinct within each person to move toward the good. God’s desire to show us what is good breaks forth into our world in the Incarnation of his Son, Jesus Christ. Yes, there is quietness in the birth of Christ. But there also is a cry to the world that our Creator has given us the gift of gifts. As the angel, Gabriel proclaimed to the shepherds, “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” *(Luke 2:10-11)*.

As I reflect over the past year, I see the world crying out in its woundedness. God allows us to choose good or evil, and sadly, we too often choose sin and violate the human dignity of others and ourselves. Despite the abuse, violence, and oppression so prevalent today, deep down, people still desire an encounter with true goodness. At the root of most personal and social problems is an unrequited desire for the One who is all good, Jesus Christ. We sense we are capable of greater love than our sins reflect.

When we hear Christmas carols and reflect on manger scenes, do we hear Jesus’s question – “Do you love me?” Our lives and purpose are important to him. I suspect most of us would like someone to ask that question directly to us so we can look within ourselves and confirm that deep capacity to love. Maybe our ability to love is wounded in some way, but Christ’s birth brings hope and healing.

As disciples on the journey, may we take a moment this season to courageously ask one another Jesus’s question – “Do you love me?” Let us also assist others to hear and answer this important question. In doing so, we acknowledge that Christ has given all people an incredible capacity to love, with him as our model.

Merry Christmas!