It is important that messaging be clear.

We would all agree to that, right? Clarity matters. Precision matters. Especially when the stakes are high.

As a pastor, I can tell you there have been many Saturday afternoons when I have stared at a sermon manuscript after hours of work and wondered not only where I am going, but whether I have actually arrived. A sermon can try to say too many things. It can wander. It can circle back on itself. It can be just open-ended enough that people line up after worship to say, “Well Pastor, that was… interesting,” which in church language can mean anything from “deeply moving” to “I have absolutely no idea what you were talking about.” That hasn’t happened here of course. Right? Right?!

And then there is the added complication that what I intend for you to hear is not always what you actually hear. A dozen people can listen to the same sermon and walk out holding twelve different takeaways. That could mean that we all process things differently. Or it could mean the Spirit is at work in ways beyond my control. It has to be one of those two. It simply cannot be for lack of my writing.

All of that makes me think about road signs.

Road signs, ideally, are models of clarity. They are meant to communicate warnings and directions in a split second so that we avoid accidents and keep traffic flowing. They are not random artistic expressions. They are federally regulated under the Manual of Uniform Traffic Control Devices for Canada—now in its sixth edition, which I will confidently file under “things you never wanted to know.” These manuals are written, reviewed, and approved by committees precisely because what seems clear to one person is not necessarily clear to another.

So of course, all signage is crystal clear, right?

If only.

Most of it is. But every now and then you encounter a sign—or worse, five signs clustered together—while you are traveling, let us say, slightly above the posted speed limit, and suddenly clarity evaporates. Was that a yield? A construction warning? A school zone? A train crossing?

Even in places where we travel more slowly—like church buildings—we see the consequences of poor signage. Have you ever watched a first-time visitor try to

navigate a church hallway? Or perhaps more painfully, a new pastor? There is confusion about which door leads where, which key opens what, where the washrooms are located—God help them if they are in a rush. If they are fortunate, someone rescues them. If not, they wander in polite desperation.

And so we might assume that something as used, translated, studied, and proclaimed as Scripture would be clearer than a church hallway.

I am not so sure.

Take for example one of the most famous verses in the Bible, from the third chapter of the Gospel of John: John 3:16 that we hear today.

If you have ever watched a football game in the United States, you have likely seen someone holding up a “John 3:16” sign in the stands. It is less common I would imagine in Canada, but the practice is familiar enough that one assumes the sign-holders believe the message is so self-evident, so universally understandable, that no explanation is required. Just a citation. Chapter and verse. Message delivered.

Or perhaps it is meant as a kind of insider shorthand, a wink to those who already know. Of course every good Christian understands what that means, right?

Well, I have been a Christian my entire life and a pastor for over a decade, and I will confess to you that I still wrestle with what exactly to do with it. I find the messaging layered and complex. I find the terminology sometimes cryptic. I find its misuse in public discourse difficult to stomach. And, if I am honest, I find it occasionally grating against my Lutheran theological sensibilities.

The chapter begins when Nicodemus—a Pharisee and respected leader among the Jews—comes to Jesus at night. He acknowledges that Jesus must be from God because of the signs he performs. Instead of engaging in small talk, Jesus immediately says that no one can see the kingdom of God without being “born from above,” or born again.

Nicodemus misunderstands. He takes Jesus literally and asks how someone can crawl back into the womb after growing old. Jesus clarifies that he is speaking of being born of water and Spirit—a spiritual rebirth brought about by God. The Spirit, he says, is like the wind: you hear it, you see its effects, but you cannot control or contain it.

Already there is mystery. Already there is room for confusion. And perhaps, if we are honest, even Jesus is not as straightforward as we might prefer.

Then the tone shifts.

Jesus refers back to Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness, saying that the Son of Man must likewise be lifted up, so that those who believe may have eternal life. And from there we hear it:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

It begins expansively—God loves the world. The whole world. Creation itself. And then, almost in the same breath, it narrows: those who believe will have eternal life.

And here is where I stumble.

Does this proclaim God’s boundless love for all, or does it place a condition upon that love? Is salvation rooted in belief alone? And what exactly does belief mean? Is it an intellectual agreement? Emotional certainty? Doctrinal correctness?

And today's lectionary reading spares us some of the remaining verses, which makes things even sharper as it appears they think we preachers might want to avoid something difficult: "Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already."

That does not sound like good news for much of the world, nor what follows.

The passage continues, clearly part of the same dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus, and it complicates things further. "This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light… Those who do what is true come to the light."

Now suddenly it is not just about belief. It is about deeds. About walking in light rather than darkness. About doing what is true, whatever what is most true is.

So which is it? Is salvation about professing who Jesus is? Or about living as he teaches?

When I prepared this sermon, I read seven commentaries from respected pastors and scholars. Not one of them meaningfully wrestled with that tension. And to me, that matters. Because this verse is often championed as the

summary of the Gospel. The sign held up in stadiums and the shorthand for salvation.

But if that were true, then the signage has to be clear for there is too much at stake if it is not.

I know that many Christians are certain this passage means that only those who consciously and explicitly believe in Jesus are saved. But to me, that reading feels thin. It risks reducing faith to a verbal agreement rather than a transformed life. It can become cheap talk if it is just a confession that is detached from the way Jesus calls us to live.

Luther teaches that we are saved by faith. But faith, in our tradition, is not mere intellectual agreement. Faith is trust. Faith is relationship. Faith is a life reshaped by grace.

And when I look across Scripture, I see a broader witness to this truth. In the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew that we heard just a few weeks ago, Jesus speaks of light already present within us, of salt that already has flavor, of goodness that must be lived out before others. He does not first establish a membership roll (though coincidentally membership is always

available here and you are most welcome!). He calls people to live in the reality of God's love.

Paul, writing to the Ephesians and I know, yikes I'm straying from the lectionary watch out for lightning bolts, [Paul] reminds us that we are saved by grace. Grace is not earned. Grace is not negotiated. Grace is God's love poured out. And it is by that grace that we are made alive in Christ and then sent into the world for good works.

If grace is not God's love for the world, what is it?

So when the messaging feels unclear, we must ask hard questions. If there are eight billion people on this planet and most are not Christian, what does that mean? Are billions beyond redemption? Is God's love truly so fragile that it fails at the boundaries of religious affiliation?

When Jesus walked the earth, there was no Christian church as we know it. He did not found a religion named after himself and based on how some have acted I wonder what he'd say. No he did not demand himself a religious body, we built institutions in response to him. So are we getting it right if we assume God's saving work is confined to our labels?

I know what I believe. I know the love of God as I have experienced it in my own life and seen it at work in this world. I have witnessed faith expressed beautifully within the church. And I have also witnessed Christlike love lived out by neighbors who would never claim the title Christian, who serve the vulnerable, who give generously, who forgive courageously, all at a great cost to themselves.

Sometimes they look more like the body of Christ than I do.

And that gives me hope. It convinces me that God does not neglect creation. That the Spirit blows where it will and that the light shines far beyond the boundaries we draw.

But my friends, clarity ultimately requires response.

What do you believe?

Amen.