

What is the number one cause of car accidents today? There are lots of causes. Obviously, weather and drunk driving are causes. Cell phones. Eating. Adjusting the radio or CD player. Some people shave, or do their hair, or read, while they are driving. There are all kinds of causes for car accidents today, but you can really boil them down to one. The number one cause of accidents, is when people aren't looking the right way. In other words, you're distracted. Part of your sandwich falls into your lap. Your dog tries to jump out the window. When you're distracted, not looking the right way, there's a good chance you'll get yourself into a car accident.

For many people, Christmas can be like a car accident. Christmas can be a disaster. Instead of a time of joy, it becomes a time of frustration and depression. Instead of experiencing laughter, you experience crying and fighting and pain. Why is it, that for many people, Christmas can be about as much fun as getting into a car accident?

It's because many people aren't looking the right way. Many people are distracted from what Christmas, and what Christianity, are all about. Today, we're going to talk about these things as we look at our Gospel lesson for today, John chapter one. Today is the third Sunday of the Advent season. Remember that Advent is that short, four week season of the church year, a time of preparation for the birth of Christ. Today we have lit the shepherd's candle. Just as those shepherds were the first witnesses of the Christ child, so today, you and I are witnesses of the Christ child to others. And that is a hint of what our sermon will be focusing on this morning. If you are looking the right way, if you're focusing on the right things, Christmas can be a time of joy. Today we're going to see what that is, as we look at John the Baptist.

Last week we met him, this prophet who lived out in the desert. The Book of John describe him this way, "There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe." Do you see how John is described here? His purpose in life was to be a witness. His purpose in life was to testify. John the Baptist was a professional witness – but you wouldn't find him in any courtroom. Instead, he was out in the desert, by the Jordan River. And he testified "concerning that light." John's job was to be a witness, testifying about The Light of the World, Jesus Christ.

When I was living in Bay City, Michigan, on the first week in December on a Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights from 6:00-9:00 P.M. we put on a Living Christmas card. You could drive around the large block our church was on, and stop at different places to catch the sights. Before each stop was a lit sign board with a section from the Gospel of Luke written. Stop one, was a tax collector booth, with people dressed in period costumes, complaining about their taxes. The next stop was a shed with Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, and a couple of real life cows. As you drove around the corner, you saw some fires in kettles, where Shepherds were warming their hands. Around them were sheep and goats. A bit farther was some bleachers where a choir sang Christmas songs in white gowns. They were angels. You turned the corner and saw 3 camels made out of paper, and a real life camel. Next to them were three wise men, pointing to a star on a telephone pole. At the end of the car drive around, You met me, with another pastor, inviting you to Christmas worship. The first year we put on the living Christmas card, we had police help, because around 10,000 people came around in the three night period of time.

On each of the three nights, a member from our congregation, dressed up like a Roman soldier, climbed up on a living white horse, and waved at cars on Broadway, motioning them to turn on 33<sup>rd</sup> street, and see this Christmas display. The job of that Roman soldier, was to show people the way to enter the Living Christmas card.

In many ways, that's what John the Baptist did. His job was to stand in the desert and

point people toward The Light of the World, Jesus Christ. He didn't use a glowing wand. Instead, he used his words: "He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light." John's job was to point people to Jesus Christ, the Light of the World.

But some people had questions. Some of the religious officials from Jerusalem came to John and asked him who he was. John told them, "I am not the Christ." "Then who are you," they asked. John told them that he wasn't Elijah, nor the special prophet they were waiting for, nor anyone else that had come to mind for them. He told them, "I am a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" John never lost focus on who he was. He never lost focused on Jesus Christ, The Light of the World, the person he was supposed to witness about to others. He didn't let those people distract him or sidetrack him from his job: "I am a witness. I testify concerning the light of the world."

It's easy to become distracted, I believe, during this particular time of the year. There is so much to do, so much to think about. There are so many hats to wear. There's the decorating hat - gotta get the tree out, get the lights up. There's the shopping hat - gotta find that perfect gift that makes everyone say, "That's wonderful!" There's the socializing hat - gotta go to the different get togethers, the different parties. There's the family hat - gotta stay in touch with family, maybe go to see them during the holidays. There's the catering hat - gotta get the perfect meal ready for everybody to eat on Christmas. And there's the working hat - gotta do my job, in spite of all the distractions of the holidays. Can you think of all the different hats you wear this time of the year? Sometimes, it can be overwhelming, especially when you're trying to balance all these different things. Sometimes, you get burnt out, you get upset, you get depressed.

And then, you realize that maybe, you've been looking the wrong way. You've become distracted. And maybe, that's why Christmas can sometimes be so difficult. That's why Christmas can sometimes be as much fun as a car accident. There is one hat you can wear this time of the year, a hat that is more important than all the others, and that John the Baptist wearing - the witnessing hat. In other words, focusing yourself and others on Jesus Christ. And when you let that hat be your top priority, your number one focus over and above all those other things - when you focus yourself and others on Jesus Christ, then everything else seems to fall into place.

Just as that person sat on a white horse stood pointing people to the lights of Living Christmas card, so also you can be that person who points people to The Light of the World - Jesus Christ.

There are plenty of advertisements for shopping. Lots of advertisements for giving to charities. Lots of talk about holiday parties. Lots of sappy, schmaltzy articles about family and love. Where are the advertisements about The Light of the World, Jesus Christ? Where are the articles about the birth of the Messiah? The advertisements are sitting in the chairs right in front of me. The advertisements are you. During the first century, it was John the Baptist. He was the witness. He was the one who testified concerning the light of the world. Now, it's you. But what does it mean, to be a witness? Does that mean that from now until Christmas, your job is to go door to door, every night, testifying concerning the light? What does that mean? How does someone become a witness for Christ in our world today?

What it means, first of all, is living an openly Christian lifestyle in front of the people around you. At work, at neighborhood gatherings, wherever you are, if you're around people who are unchurched, unchristian, you are different. You're living an openly Christian lifestyle right in front of them. That means that you do what our second Scripture reading talks about - you are joyful always, you are a person of prayer, you are thankful in all circumstances. You are

someone who is honest and sincere and loving and generous and helpful. And you live this way openly, in front of other people. "In late 18th century Poland, the Kaiser's forces were burning all the Jewish villages. One village had been burned and nothing was left standing. As the sun came up the next morning an old Jewish gentlemen pounded a few boards together, made a sellers stall and opened it up for business.

A young man walked passed, stared in disbelief and asked, "What are you selling among these ruins. The man smiled and said, "I am selling hope. You can sell water on a dry desert, so the place to sell hope is on the ash heap of destruction." God wants us to give hope to this world. He wants us to be people of hope. He wants us to be people who see beyond the brokenness of this world to His promise of Grace brought to this world as the Babe born in a manger on Christmas eve. As our Old Testament lesson reminds us this morning, Jesus Christ has released us from prison. He has turned our darkness to light. He became a human being in order to take away our sins. He is the reason God forgives you. He is the reason you can look forward to heaven someday.

The second part of being a witness is being willing to share your faith with others. That doesn't mean pinning someone against the wall and talking to them about Christ against their will. It means that, when there is an opportunity, you share what's in your heart. When someone says to you, "I always feel so stressed out during the holidays. I can't wait till it's over. How do you keep it together?" Then you can be a witness and say, "What helps me, during Christmas, is remembering what's most important. What helps me, is remembering my own personal Christmas story. You see, during my life, I have made mistakes over and over again, and no matter how hard I try, I'm still making mistakes today. But I know that God became a man – that's what Christmas is all about. And even though I don't deserve it, he came down here for the sole purpose of dying for me, washing all my mistakes away. That's my own personal Christmas story, and I focus on that, and that's how I keep it all together when things get crazy this time of the year."

Be a witness for Christ this Christmas. You can do it by living a Christian lifestyle. And you can do it by sharing your personal Christmas story with others. Don't let yourself get distracted this Christmas. Keep looking the right way. Be a John the Baptist, no matter where you are. Perhaps, through you, someone will receive the greatest gift of all this Christmas, the gift of faith. Amen