

People often ask where I get stories for my sermons – because, of course, not all of them come from personal experience. The truth is, I get them from all over. Back when I started out, I sometimes had to search and search through this book and that before I finally found one that fit, but in these days of the internet, there are all kind of resources right at my fingertips. The trouble is, some of the stories are good, some are really good, and then again, some are really *too* good -- they're stories I *wish* were true, but I suspect they were made up by someone who *also* wished they were true. Here's an example. A 5-year old is showing his Christmas presents to his grandma. She asks, "Did you get everything you wanted for Christmas?" The boy thinks a moment, then answers, "No, but that's OK. It wasn't *my* birthday."

You see what I mean. Now, what are the chances a 5-year old would answer that way? I *wish* the story were true. I wish a kid would remember whose birthday Christmas is. And I wish a kid could rein in his expectations accordingly. But frankly, adults even have trouble doing that! In fact, a lot of the stress and strain this time of year has to do with expectations – expectations we put on ourselves, expectations put on us by others, expectations of the season itself. And it would be nice if we could rein them in. It would be nice if we put the focus where it belonged. We would enjoy Christmas a whole lot more! But think what that would take! We would need an attitude like John the Baptist had when he said of Jesus, **“He must increase; I must decrease.”**

Actually, come to think of it, that's not such a bad goal to strive for! Yes, Bible scholars, I know John said this in a very different context. I know he wasn't talking about Christmas. But it's the attitude I'm thinking of. His attitude! When some of John's followers got concerned about people focusing more and more on Jesus, John told them that's where the focus belonged – not on him but on Jesus: **“He must increase; I must decrease.”** Sure, up until then the focus had been on John – on his ministry, his message. And these followers probably had enjoyed basking in the glory. But John had always known: *This is not about me. The focus doesn't belong on me. My job is to prepare the way for the Messiah. Now that He is here, the focus must be on Jesus: **“He must increase; I must decrease.”***

Clearly, this was the proper attitude for John to take. But you know, it was also a very practical attitude. Putting the focus where it belonged spared John a lot of stress and strain, and made him a lot more effective. I mean, what if John had just focused on his own ego and feelings? *“What about me?”* Or what if he had felt he had to cater to his followers' expectations? *“Can't let them down!”* Can you imagine the results? What a mess! And what a waste of time! Fortunately, John was wiser than that. He knew what was important and what was not. He knew what was called for and what could be let go. He knew because of where he put His focus – squarely on Jesus: **“He must increase; I must decrease.”**

This attitude always makes a difference, but I can't help but think it would especially make a difference dealing with the stress and strain we face this time of year. Focus squarely on Jesus: **"He must increase; I must decrease."**

Of course, some may see this as too spiritual a solution to what they consider a practical problem. They'll tell us: *Just simplify a bit; cut out some things, and the stress and strain will go away.* But will it? Maybe to some degree, but not totally. For often the real cause of stress and strain lies elsewhere – in expectations. And whether they are expectations we put on ourselves, expectations put on us by others, or expectations of the season itself, there are two problems with them. First, they are often unfair and unrealistic. Worse yet, even knowing that doesn't necessarily help. We may know perfectly well how unfair and unrealistic certain expectations are, yet still feel terrible when we don't fulfill them! So you see why just cutting out things won't necessarily solve the problem. That might make us feel even feel worse! They're tricky little devils, these expectations! And when they grab our focus, man can they spoil Christmas!

Here's an example of what I mean. After church today, suppose you meet a friend at the store. You get to talking. Before too long, Christmas comes up, and your friend admits, "I just can't seem to get into the holiday spirit this year. Honestly, we've been through so much, and I just don't feel like celebrating. Oh, I'll do what I have to for the sake of the kids – you know, decorate the house, bake the cookies, spend way too much on presents. But even that's a chore. The kids expect so much! There's no end to the list of presents they want! Why can't Christmas be the way it used to be? It's gotten so materialistic! I really miss the way it used to be when we were kids! The whole family would get together at grandma's house. There'd be a big dinner with all the traditional goodies. And we just had so much fun! The tree may have been kind of scraggly, but that didn't matter. There may have been fewer presents underneath, but so what? We had each other. We had warmth and laughter and love! And to me, it's just not Christmas if it can't be like that."

Sound familiar? I'm sure we've all heard talk like that. Maybe we've even said things like that. So let's take a closer look and ask: *What's really the problem here? What's really causing the stress and strain?* Clearly, it's not just particular chores, so that if we cut them out, things would be fine. The problem goes deeper, doesn't it? Underneath, the problem is expectations! Personal expectations about what Christmas is supposed to be like. Others' expectations about what we're supposed to do. Why, even expectations about what we're supposed to feel! *I can't get in the mood! I just don't feel the Christmas spirit!* And why? *Because this or that is wrong with my life. Because this or that has changed. Because a certain loved one can't be here. Because another loved one has passed away. Because I'm going through hard times. Because my schedule is too busy. Because the kids are driving me nuts.* Because, because, because... The list could go on and on!

But do you see what is notably missing from that list? There's not even the tiniest hint of what Christmas is really about! Not even the tiniest mention of Jesus...or why He came...or what His birth means! It's all: "*What about me?*" Or "*What's expected of me?*" It's all: "*What am I feeling or not feeling?*" Honestly, I can't think of a better way to create stress and strain! Can you? Or a better way to miss the true blessings of Christmas! So you see why merely cutting back won't solve this problem. It goes deeper. What's needed is a shift of focus – a sharper focus on Jesus. **“He must increase; I must decrease.”**

To see what a difference shifting our focus could make, think about the first Christmas. The best Christmas ever, right? Yet, by today's standards so much was missing! Mary and Joseph didn't put up a single decoration. They didn't buy a single gift, bake a single cookie, or send a single card. Not a single member of the family showed up to celebrate with them. There was no Christmas tree or fancy dinner, either. And as for the holiday spirit, I doubt Joseph was waltzing around chuckling ho-ho-ho, what with there being no room for them in the inn and Mary having to give birth in a stable! That first Christmas, there were none of the holiday trappings that some consider essential. They didn't even have the holiday spirit! That first Christmas, all they had was Jesus. All they had was Jesus! Yet it was the best Christmas ever, wasn't it? Of course, it didn't have to be. Mary and Joseph could have focused on what was wrong, what was missing, what was just too much to bear. But they didn't. Wisely, they focused on Jesus. They rejoiced in who He was and why He came. They focused first and foremost on Jesus, and that's what made it the best Christmas ever!

That's what can make this a great Christmas for us, too: focusing more on Jesus; focusing less on ourselves, especially our ideas of what Christmas should be like. **“He must increase; I must decrease.”**

You know, it's actually kind of ironic when people feel they just can't get "*into*" Christmas because life isn't going right for them. I mean, isn't that the reason Jesus came into this world: because life wasn't going right...for anyone? Today's Gospel says He came to bring light into our darkness. So if there is ever a time when Christmas should mean something special to us, it's in times of darkness – times when life is not going right. As the prophet Isaiah foretold Jesus' birth, he said Jesus would **“be called wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, the prince of peace.”** Well, when do you most appreciate having a **“Wonderful Counselor”**? When you're sorrowing or confused. When do you most appreciate having a **“Mighty God”** to rely on? When you're weak, defeated, afraid. When do you most appreciate having this **“Everlasting Father”** to hold you in His arms? When you feel lost, alone, abandoned. And when do you most appreciate having this **“Prince of Peace”**? When life is in chaos, turned upside down. Jesus came to bring light into our darkness, whatever that darkness may be. He came to bring us forgiveness and eternal life, grace sufficient for any challenge, strength made perfect in weakness, peace such as the world cannot give. Yes, that first Christmas Jesus came to bring light

into our darkness! So why would we not welcome that light – in fact, rejoice in it – just because life isn't going right? Please let us do just the opposite! Especially if life isn't going right, let go of holiday expectations that just get in the way. Let go of them, and get a firmer grip on Jesus. Let Him be the main focus; Him and the blessings He's come to bring! Let John's attitude toward Jesus be our own: **"He must increase; I must decrease."** Then, whatever we do or don't get done, Christmas will really be Christmas. Then, whatever our circumstances may be, this will be a Christmas worth celebrating!

Along these very lines, I remember a pastor telling about a Christmas card he got from two elderly sisters. After their parents died, they had managed the family farm by themselves. But now, old age was taking its toll on them, too. One sister was going blind, and the other – well, just that past month she had tripped over a chicken while chasing a stray calf, and she wound up breaking her hip. As you can imagine, chores piled up. Bills did, too. Things were in a pretty sorry state. But even in this darkness, a ray of hope and joy beamed through their Christmas card. They wrote: *"Again this year we welcome our Lord Jesus, who comes to us even in the midst of our mess!"*

Don't you just love that story? And in case you're wondering: No, it's not one of those stories I find suspect. I know the pastor. I know people like those two sisters. And you and I can be like them, too. The key is where we choose to focus this holiday season. Whether or not we simplify, whether or not we cut back, if we focus squarely on Jesus, that will permeate our whole celebration. It won't matter so much whether Christmas feels "magical." The *miracle* of Christ's birth will be quite enough! It won't matter so much whether we've got the *"holiday spirit."* What is that compared to the deep down assurance: **"To you is born a Savior"**? Even if this is a time of darkness, we can rejoice in the gift of Emmanuel, God-with-us, and draw comfort from the promises we have in Him. We just need to focus squarely on Jesus – welcoming Him more fully, trusting Him more deeply, appreciating Him more completely. Yes, that really is the key: **"He must increase; I must decrease."** Amen.