Columns



Sunrise on a road in Uttar Pradesh, India (Dreamstime/Akhtaransa)



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The season of Advent brings joyful memories every year. One such memory was when I politely declined an invitation to a birthday bash of a close friend at the onset of Advent 2021. Not that I hate celebrations in an opulent party hall in the company

of my friends, but the day would have conflicted with a different joyride I had scheduled on the same day.

The ride was a well-planned four-week preparatory Advent journey toward Bethlehem, to enjoy the greatest birthday bash human history ever has witnessed — the holy birth of Jesus we celebrate as Christmas.

I hit upon the idea of taking along a group of students — the Ambassadors of Hope — with *giving* and *going green* on my radar. I wanted to drive home for them the messages: "Giving is better than receiving" and "Earth is our common home."

Before hitting the road, I collected them for an informal buzz session to ask them about their preparations for Christmas. "Of course, it's all underway! The orders are placed for the tallest glittering star-decked tree, glowing candles, snowmen of all sizes, a long-bearded Santa with his reindeer, big cake and turkey, gorgeous wardrobes, hats, suits, boots, colorful gifts for the Babe of Bethlehem and our friends" — and so their list lengthened.

"Wow, that's awesome," I affirmed. "But is all this ostentatious stuff befitting to Jesus born in an open manger in the lap of nature? Wasn't his birthday attended by the poor, lowly, humble and simple humans and animals?"

"Oh, aye, that's true," came their unanimous reply.

So I suggested we embark on a short ride as part of the four-week Advent journey on a "road less traveled." The road might be rugged but it will be strewn with gifts well-pleasing to the Baby of Bethlehem.



Biology teacher Sangeetha Madan gifts Sister Rupa, an Ursuline Sister of Mary Immaculate, with a sapling, motivating students at Mariampur School in Kanpur, India, to live sustainably in harmony with nature. (Courtesy of Tisy Jose)

The following day, we left our comfort zone and kick-started our ride with baskets filled with foodstuffs, clothes, toys, shoes and socks, pens and pencils, notebooks and other goodies meant for the less fortunate children of a slum school not too far away from our posh city school.

Besides those things, we took with us two dozen saplings of shade trees to be planted on a preplanned roadside.

After serving food to the hungry poor and planting the saplings, the Ambassadors of Hope were taken to a restaurant where they enjoyed a meal followed by a short sightseeing tour.

When we got back to the school we sat around for a "foray forum" or "debriefing" (like you would have to discuss a film) to assess our joy ride.

But unlike returning from a cinema, I found the students vibrant with new energy. To my questions on each aspect of the trip they joyfully responded that it was really a "joy ride." They said they had experienced more joy in giving than receiving.

Indeed, the smiles of gratitude and satisfaction on the faces of our less fortunate friends filled us with a winged joy capable of flying us to Bethlehem and beyond. Our interaction with the deprived of our society reminded us of all the blessings and abundance God has given us, for which we ought to be grateful to God and praise him every day.

"What were your gifts to the Babe of Bethlehem?" I asked.

"A green spiritual bouquet made of all the saplings we planted and a fresh colorful garland strung with our acts of kindness, smiles, empathy, compassion, goodwill, love and charity," came their resounding reply.

At that, I led them in a huge round of applause followed by a hymn of thanksgiving. Then the students joyfully left for home.

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I continue my Advent joy ride within the four walls of my convent, where most of the sisters are senior citizens. They gift me with ample chances to go the extra mile in serving the deaf and the lame.

To go or not to go depends on the choice I make, like the one I used in the lead of this story. Sure enough, we are what our choices are. Unlike animals and plants, we humans have the God-given freedom to choose. It's both a unique privilege as well

as a frightening responsibility.

Frightening, because we are free to choose life or death, evil or good, heaven or hell. As God told us in the Bible: "Today I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and curses. Now I call on heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Oh, that you would choose life, so that you and your descendants might live!" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

The choice always is left to us, without letting anyone else choose for us. Each of us as a sentient human being ought not depend upon others to decide for us what to choose or not. Life is God's greatest gift to us to be lived in full by making the right choices and glorifying him on earth.

Although each of us has the freedom to make our Advent journeys by different paths, it's important that we reach our ultimate destination — Bethlehem. If our preparation for Christmas engages us in impulsive buying rather than compassionate giving, fanciful decorations rather than cleansing of our hearts, we are bound to end up elsewhere.

My choice is to make Advent a joy ride by choosing to serve rather than to be served, to be patient rather than angry, to be kind rather than rude, to be spiritual rather than materialistic, to love rather than hate, to be compassionate rather than indifferent, to be altruistic rather than selfish — in sum to be spiritual rather than material.

After our Advent joy ride there welled up in my heart a spiritual joy that no pleasure ride could give. Such a joy ride — driven on a sacrificial paradigm — transmits hope, love, peace and goodwill that the angel choir sang more than 2,000 years ago at the birth of Jesus.

Let's choose to make this Advent a joy ride that will bring joy to the poorest of the poor, and those pushed to the periphery.

This story appears in the **Advent** feature series. View the full series.