Columns
Spirituality



National Highway 66 in Goa, India (Wikimedia Commons/Rajaramraok)



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It was indeed interesting to witness the hustle and bustle along National Highway 66 in Goa, India, as Goa hosted the 37th National Games. Potholed roads were carefully repaired. Moreover, the persistent stench in the fish market, which often gave splitting headaches, vanished!

Roads and streets preparations to welcome the delegates and the nation's leader were underway, closing the highway for hours to eliminate obstacles on the roads, with speed breakers. To my surprise, all this was done with eager anticipation for the arrival of the expected guests for the sports event.

My mind sensibly noted the extensive preparations to welcome and please earthly leaders and dignitaries of the states, who are mere human creatures. I pondered how much more preparation would have been necessary to receive the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, who didn't even have a decent place to be born, and no one offered their rooms!

The 2,000-year-old story is not old and outdated but ever new and ever happening, taking birth here and now on the streets, in slum areas, market places, outside the balconies of our houses, convents or buildings, and on the outskirts and the peripheries of the world. To receive an earthly leader of the nation, the state invested crores of rupees and many hours of work.

The words of the prophet Isaiah kept ringing in my ears (40:3-4):

> In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord!
> Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God!
> Every valley shall be lifted up,
> every mountain and hill made low;
> The rugged land shall be a plain,
> the rough country, a broad valley.

This Scripture was fulfilled by the local government and continues to haunt me in the Advent season.

Indeed, it is a clarion call to straighten the crooked ways of our life, including rational assumptions and presumptuous thinking. We are called to straighten perverse attitudes and inadequate behavioral patterns of communication, addressing situations with those working for us or under us in the various

departments.

Furthermore, there is a need to straighten the warped or broken relationships in our families, communities, presbyteries and society.

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As we await to celebrate the birth of Jesus, we hear again an echo from Isaiah's words in John's Gospel, where the Baptist preaches, asking the crowds to prepare the way for the Messiah by straightening the crooked paths of their lives.

Then, we hear the call again (Luke 3:1-20) during his preaching, when people asked John for guidance. He advised: "Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages." To the tax collectors he said: "Stop collecting more than what is prescribed." He instructed the crowds to bear fruit and share their goods with neighbors. This was John's way of saying: Straighten your crooked ways!

On our own, we cannot straighten the crooked paths or ways of our lives, but the powerful intervention of God in our lives can work wonders, as exemplified in the lives of Matthew, Zacchaeus, the Samaritan woman and others in the Scriptures. Their stories serve as a motivating force, urging us to examine those areas in our lives that need our attention.

Our crookedness or faults, failures and inordinate behaviors, pointed out by our colleagues, friends or family members in moments of anger, call us to straighten our paths The letters of St. Paul are tools for us to reflect on our ways, to choose the fill up the potholed spaces and walk straight.

In our pursuit to straighten our paths this Advent season, we are called to wait upon the Lord, much like the aged Simeon and Anna in the Bible. They waited for years with eager expectation and their desire was fulfilled. The season of Advent prepares our hearts to receive the Messiah gracefully.

We don't need to wait for God to act, but we need to play an active part, like Isaiah advises to "widen the space of your tent" (54:2). To widen the space requires accepting our shortcomings, making the choice to give up our old ways, and cleaning the dirt or the murk that stains our soul.

I need to do my part, just as space was made to take shelter in the stable. Joseph "widened the space" — cleaning up the mess and freeing space. This involves addressing the mess in relationships and clearing the collection of unwanted garbage stored in our hearts and minds.

In media language, it would be akin to "formatting" as even our gadgets call for freeing space! Therefore, I must ask, is there space in my heart or is it cluttered with worldly concerns, clutter that calls for unloading, letting go, formatting?

As we approach the celebration of the birth of Jesus, I realize that just as speed breakers were leveled and the highway roads were made straight for the delegates and dignitaries to pass by, the prophet Isaiah calls us to mend our crooked ways and, by our way of life, be a forerunner to our lay collaborators, neighbors, workers, family and our members with whom we live.

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