

Every metropolitan area has its "traffic watch" helicopters hovering over turnpikes and highways advising morning rush-hour commuters about tie-ups and accidents and slowdowns. Reporters will advise the listener not to use certain side streets, since they are overloaded to the point of a standstill. I recently heard one reported on the early morning news suggest alternate highways to bypass a heavily congested route that was due to a tractor-trailer breaking down. After further checking, he indicated that the alternate routes he had just suggested were also tied up. He concluded with an exasperated sigh, "You might as well stay home or turn around and go home!"

It's good to have alternate routes and bypasses. Wise planners always try to have contingent action plan in place...just in case. It's good to have a Plan B. There are certain decisions in life, however, for which there are no options. Now-or-never moments come when our only response is either yes or no.

Like the old gospel hymn says, there is a personal wilderness for each of us, a lonesome valley which, like Jesus, we must walk by ourselves and no one can walk it for us. In his wilderness, Jesus had to choose; he had to say yes or no to temptations. His no to temptation was his yes to faith, to obedience, to vocation, to God's claim on his life.

Consider the rich young man who meets the Messiah on day in Judea. Prosperous and prominent, a good and decent man in every sense of the word, he comes to Jesus with a sense of feeling unfulfilled. He asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life," to enter the Kingdom, to have peace with my soul? Jesus' reply is terse: "Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor,...and come, follow me."

With that summons, the moment is charged with crisis. The man's life is now poised in the balance. The choice is too clear, and he must decide. Moments pass like hours. Finally, the man lowers his eyes and slowly turns from Jesus to begin the long, slow retreat of saying no. He had come wanting to say yes, but the possibility which Jesus lays before him is not what he expects. He wants some other options. But when there are none, he turns and walks away.

I know something of what he must have felt as he walked away, because I too have said no to Jesus...just as I know we all have at one time or another. I have wanted an alternate route, and finding none, turned on my heels in retreat. In those pivotal wilderness moments, I have discovered what the Judean must have realized.

Such crisis moments of decision force us to think about our absolutes. Absolutes are those things we are convinced we cannot live without....those things we believe are imperative to our happiness and security. Absolutes are those things that define us, those things by which we measure ourselves. Absolutes are what give our lives meaning.

To meet the Messiah is a yes-or-no proposition which forces us to examine and admit to what it is we hold as absolute. This is exactly what happened to the rich young man. Jesus had...and still has...a disturbing way of putting everything into a different perspective.

In his presence we cannot get by with "almost" or "maybe" or "later." A confrontation with Jesus is always a rigorous examination of the absolutes of our lives.

Tony is the grandson of the founder of a vast grocery supermarket chain. He has been a rich kid all his life. He grew up in Newport Beach and Rolling Hills, two very posh and exclusive areas in Southern California. He graduated from college...toured the world. He was a leading long-distance swimmer and a member of the U.S. Olympic Kayak Team at Munich and Tokyo. With all of this, he still felt unsettled...empty.

Several years ago Christ met Tony in the poor people of Tijuana, Mexico, and Tony said yes. He has been there ever since, serving the people who live in the shacks of one of the poorest districts in Tijuana. Tony had purchased a used bus and he began by transporting people who needed medical attention to clinics. Wherever he went, kids gathered around the bus. He learned they were hungry; some of them without home or family...and others left all day to fend for themselves.

Tony began to feed the children on the old bus. Later he built a stone-block home, which today is known as *Hogar De Los Ninos* (The Children's Home). It's not a fancy place, but there is ample food to

eat, enough mattresses to sleep on...and there is love...because Tony cares.

Crisis moments of decision reveal what it is that we hold absolute. Meeting the Messiah, we come face to face with what we value most. The rich young man who knelt before Jesus came ready to say yes, but he said no and turned away.

He turned away because Jesus reminded him that there was only one absolute – namely God, and serving in his kingdom. That is the only MUST in life, and everything else is subordinate.

“One thing you lack,” Jesus said to him. One thing remains to be done, one last decision must be made in order to find what you seek. “Go, sell all you have, give to the poor, and come...follow me.”

Jesus recognized that for this man possessions had become his absolute. For others who met Jesus, it was not possessions but status...or rank...or power. Still for others it was family connections, religious traditions, display of intellect and learning, or even their physical limitations which had become the commanding absolute in their lives. In each case, Jesus challenged that absolute.

Whatever it was there was one thing that these people used to define themselves – one thing that took priority over everything else.

We cannot have it both ways. There is no alternate route. “No one can serve two masters,” said Jesus, “for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”

Jesus knew what he was talking about. In the wilderness he had declared his “yes” to God and his “no” to compromise. “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.” So it is with us. We cannot worship God and at the same time idolize our position in the community, or our position at work, our prestige...authority...our intelligence and knowledge...our wardrobe...our house...the latest high tech gadgets.

We cannot at the same time live a life in the kingdom...a life of caring love...and a life of indulgent self-serving. We can't have it both ways.

Two men were part of a small Lenten sharing group in their church. They were discussing personal commitment to Christ and how we translate that into our everyday life, our relationships, our business affairs, etc. One man asked, "What would happen to me if I ran my business as Christ would want me to? It might mean financial ruin."

There was a moment of silence, and then one of the other men replied, "And what will happen if you don't? What KIND of ruin to you want?"

We can't have it both ways. In our personal wilderness, we will meet the Messiah. His words abide: "One thing you lack"...and it might be different for each of us...but he says, "One thing you lack...then come, follow me."

That is our summons and our promise...and it is either a yes...or a no.

So be it for us.