

I Still Want to Follow Jesus

C Epiphany 1--Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

The New York Times columnist, David Brooks, recently wrote an editorial about our response as a country to last month's attempted Christmas day airplane bombing and the security lapses it has uncovered. In the editorial, Brooks describes how Americans in the mid-twentieth century had a lot of faith in our institutions but also a realistic appreciation of their fallibility and how they can screw up. Brooks writes, "that mature attitude seems to have largely vanished. Now we seem to expect perfection from government and then throw temper tantrums when it is not achieved." We have become like adolescents, Brooks says, and as a result we don't have level-headed conversations about the real risks and benefits of being a free society in today's world. Brooks likens the situation to a religious crisis, as many Americans confront the failure of the "gods" in which they have put their faith: "technology, technocracy, [and] centralized government control."ⁱ

Now in highlighting Brooks' point, I do *not* mean to suggest that changes shouldn't be made in the way our government does intelligence and security. The more we learn about the bomber, and all the red flags he raised before getting on that flight, the more discouraging it is. One would like to feel that terrorists had to do something at least *mildly* sly and tricky in order to get as close to success as that man came.

But I think Brooks' larger point about the immaturity of our public conversation, and our misguided faith in technology to keep us safe, is a very trenchant one. The fact is

that we live in world of risk, and no bureaucracy or high tech body-scanning system can change that. Mistakes will be made. People of evil intent will from time to time succeed. And if we can't be honest about this truth, if we can't stop casting new technologies or government agencies as the gods who will keep us safe, then we are consigning ourselves to a hysterical, finger-pointing, adolescent way of dealing with the world. We are suggesting that our only objective is physical safety and that there's no principle we wouldn't be willing to sacrifice to achieve it.

But what, you may ask, does any of this have to do with today's baptism of John Christian Hoffman? Well for one thing, little John is growing up in this radically shrinking, religiously divided, post-911 world. He is growing up in the very culture that Brooks criticizes, with its unrealistic expectations that technocracy can secure our safety. And one thing baptism does is to offer an alternative to this way of engaging with the world. One thing baptism does is to remind us that the God we follow does not guarantee our physical safety. In fact, the God we follow calls us into the inherently vulnerable stance of love toward the world. The God we follow beckons us to commit to a way that does not make our security its highest aim.

This was illustrated so powerfully for me the other day when I listened to a BBC radio interview with an Anglican priest named Andrew White. White leads the largest church in Baghdad, or all of Iraq for that matter. The interviewer asked if there were many convert baptisms at this church, and White said not many and he doesn't encourage them because the people he baptizes usually get killed. He tells the ones who insist on being baptized, "You realize you could be killed," and they say to him, "Yes, and I still want to follow Jesus." So he baptizes them in secret. But word often gets out anyway,

and they are gunned down in the street. Last year, his congregation lost 93 of its members to violence. Yet in the midst of the threats this church faces, it continues to work for interfaith dialogue and understanding. It continues to stand as a witness to the possibility of peaceful coexistence. In fact this Anglican priest made very clear to the interviewer that in spite of his community's persecution, he believed that good people of any religion go to heaven.ⁱⁱ

You realize you could be killed? Yes, and I still want to follow Jesus. Quietly, these Christians stake their lives on the non-violent way that Jesus taught. Quietly they accept the risks of this commitment. What a contrast to the hysteria and political blaming for which David Brooks has so rightly criticized our national response to security threats. What an illustration that there are places in this world where baptism is an incredibly dangerous act, just as it was for Jesus and John the Baptist, who set their own executions in motion through their participation in this ritual in today's gospel reading. What a reminder that we help to usher in God's kingdom of stability and justice not when we cling to safety at any cost, but when we commit ourselves to courageous and peaceful love. May John Christian Hoffman embrace just such a path. May we all.

ⁱ David Brooks, "The God that Fails," *New York Times*, 12/31/09. Accessed on 1/7/10 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/01/opinion/01brooks.html?hp>.

ⁱⁱ "11/04/2009 - Canon Andrew White." Accessed on 1/7/10 at http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/documentaries/2009/04/090420_theinterview_110409.shtml