

Advent and the Power of Positive Faith

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For fifty-two years Norman Vincent Peale served as Pastor of America's oldest Protestant congregation, Marble Collegiate Church on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 29th Street in New York City. During those years he also became one of the nation's most popular motivational speakers, filling civic centers and convention halls from coast-to-coast, primarily based on the almost unparalleled success of his book *The Power of Positive Thinking*. People around the world were familiar with that work and associated Marble Church with its message.

For almost a decade, I had the privilege of serving as senior minister of Marble Collegiate Church. During that time I came to understand that there were two Peales, though for the most part, the world knew only one. There was Norman Vincent Peale the motivator, who traveled all around the globe proclaiming with vigor, "You can if you think you can!" However, when back home in the pulpit at Marble, there was the lesser-known Peale the preacher, altering his message somewhat by teaching, "I can do all things *through Christ* who strengthens me." In the civic centers, his focus was pop psychology. In the pulpit, his focus was Christology. The world knew (and still knows and purchases) his book *The Power of Positive Thinking*. But the church knew his other, less heralded book, *The Positive Power of Jesus Christ*. And that power is our locus of hope in the season of Advent. Our hope resides not in our own strengths or abilities but in the doctrine of Incarnation, our faith that the timeless Word becomes flesh in our day and time, shining light in human darkness which the darkness cannot overcome.

Moreover, our hope is that we, enlightened by that Word made flesh, will be transformed into loving, serving, inclusive, how-can-we-save-the-world-from-its-current-madness congregations. Our hope is not merely located in the historical Good News that Jesus came, but in the spiritual Good News that He comes even still. Our hope is that, in certain ways, he will come through women and men who are open and faithful conduits of the Holy Presence. That is the definition of *Incarnation*.

The Word *becomes* flesh and *dwells* among us, present tense. And so we face the challenges of our current age with its divisiveness and political polarization, with its sin and sadness, with its fears and fragility, knowing that Light comes in the midst of it all. It comes as a beacon of hope that seeks to dispel the shadows of racism, socio-economic inequities, gender bias, oppression of individuals based on their sexuality or places of origin or faith systems, trafficking, child or spousal abuse, hunger, environmental irresponsibility, despair, loneliness, anger, guilt, insecurity, and whatever other obstacles exist on the road to the Kingdom of God. "A light shines in the darkness"

How did the Marble Church I served proclaim the Advent Message? It focused on the same story that was Peale's focus (and every other preacher's focus) all those years before: the positive power of Jesus Christ. That's the message as December approaches. Incarnation informs and dominates proclamation. The question is simply "What does it mean that Jesus comes as Word made flesh?" The question is not ultimately about pageantry or cantatas or the performance of current leaders vis-à-vis the

legacies of their predecessors. The question is purely and simply about the Birth of all births, the Infant cradled in Mary's arms, and what that means to a broken world which needs to be made whole.

Advent is about the message, the positive power of The Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us as Light. And that Light shines in the darkness of our troubled world, and the darkness cannot overcome it.