

From 1932 to 1984, Norman Vincent Peale was the minister of the Marble Collegiate Church in New York City, the church of which President-elect Donald Trump's parents were members.

He was a great success; the church grew from 600 to 5000 in a few years time.

Peale became famous as the advocate of the power of positive thinking, a sort of gentle self-hypnosis that involves banishing negative experiences and perceptions with repeated optimistic phrases.

His book of the same title sold into the millions and shaped the content of Guideposts, the little magazine you might remember in your grandparents' kitchen, that provided a steady diet of positive inspiration for life.

Peale's work was condemned by the psychiatric establishment; most found it dangerous advice if taken up by the truly troubled.

The method would only lead to deeper despair in its reliance on denial and fantasy.

Theologians and other less successful preachers didn't like it any better.

Reinhold Niebuhr of Union Theological Seminary said, "this new cult is dangerous.

Anything which corrupts the gospel hurts Christianity. And it hurts people too. It helps them to feel good while they are evading the real issues of life."¹

Our brother Joseph was not thinking positively as he regarded his pregnant fiancée.

If you find \$20 in the aisle of the church today, you will not know whose \$20 it is.

But you will know whose \$20 it is **not**.

Knowing something negatively; that it is not yours, is vital.

So it was with Joseph and the child to be born, and the general, negative stance anyone who understood biology would take in such a moment was the road he embraced.

He assumed her unfaithful and he would dismiss her.

This was a real problem, not to be banished by rose-colored glasses or positive thinking.

Yet then, God intervened.

A dream and an angel speaking in it, reminding us of the other Joseph and Jacob and so many others who heard the voice of God in a dream and changed their course of action.

Joseph's initial assumption was natural and framed his reaction to the news of her pregnancy;

the intervening, supernatural power of God put a new possibility before him and before all of us.

Not denial, not phantasy; the child was still not his;

he was still rendered a sideline character to the salvation drama involving Mary and the Spirit and the Son.

Joseph may still have wondered; why me?

I didn't sign up for this; shame and sadness may still have been with him.

¹ The Case against Easy Religion," William Peters. Redbook Magazine, September 1955, pp. 22-23, 92-94).

And yet he answered God's call to be faithful, and God's holy purposes were worked out. Sometimes how we feel about something doesn't matter at all.

Expectation matters greatly, and a Christian person will expect with some sophistication. Like Joseph, we will expect that sin matters; that disobedience to the loving law of God will lead to brokenness and pain in the world.

Our own hearts will be broken and sometimes the obvious, painful explanation will need to be accepted.

But Christian people will also expect suffering sometimes to be redeemed; will attend to their dreams; will listen as much as they speak in their prayers; will imagine, will count it possible, that God will speak, will reorient them, will show them that what they see is sometimes only what they think they see

and that what they will get is something else entirely.

Jesus called us to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves, simultaneously, he meant.

Isaiah dreamed of Virgin who would bring a Son into the world, a child who would refuse the evil and choose the good.

Not deny the evil, not pretend it away, but face and defeat it;

refuse it any further power by accepting it and enfolding it in divine love on the Cross.

He would refuse the evil by choosing the good.

St. Paul says that Jesus is the image (Greek: *icon*) of the invisible God.

Jesus shows us the God who refuses the evil and chooses the good;

the God who is supremely good.

The evil of Aleppo, the evil of violence against women and children of which our news is so often full, the evil of the poverty we accept for so many of our neighbors,

all of these God ultimately, finally, refuses and against them, chooses good.

Let us not doubt that God sees and judges.

We are all in great spiritual danger right now, for Christmas invites nothing so well as denial, a blindness to the reality of our broken world and the power of sin.

The baking and the shopping and socializing, and the good we all do this season;

these things are not evil but leave us with little time to see, to think, to pray.

Perhaps if we do those things, of the heart and mind, we can do the other things better,

we can see them as our own choosing of the good,

our own refusing of the evil that we have allowed ourselves to see,

as Joseph allowed himself to imagine, before God changed his mind.

The child, presented to you today, in gold, enthroned on a Virgin's lap, saw and sees the world as it truly is and loves it, all the same.

His eyes are deep with divine wisdom; his arm extends to bless.