

Edgar Guest, an English born American poet whose poetry became popular throughout the United States in the early 20th century, once wrote: “I’d rather see a sermon than hear one any day.” And as a preacher, I have to say I agree with him. Over the years I’ve heard some very memorable speeches, but it’s the actions of others that have spoken so loudly. For instance, you probably by now saw the footage of former Senator and World War II veteran Bob Dole from a few days ago, who was helped to his feet by an aide as he can no longer walk, so he could stand and salute President Bush’s casket. No words needed to be said; rather it was simply an act that spoke of love and respect.

Some years ago, a woman named Rebecca Pippert experienced a similar moment at church. She recalls a man named Bill, who had wild hair, wore a T-shirt with holes in it, blue jeans and no shoes. In the entire time she knew him, she never once saw Bill wear a pair of shoes. Rain, sleet or snow, Bill was barefoot. This was literally his wardrobe for his whole four years of college.

She reflected that he was brilliant and looked like he was always pondering the esoteric. He became a Christian while attending college. Across the

street from the campus was a church full of well-dressed, middle-class people. They wanted to develop a ministry to the college students, but they were not sure how to go about it.

One day, Bill decided to worship there. He walked into the church, complete with wild hair, T-shirt, blue jeans and bare feet. The church was completely packed, and the service had already begun. Bill started down the aisle to find a place to sit. By now the people were looking a bit uncomfortable, but no one said a word.

As Bill moved closer and closer to the pulpit, he realized there were no empty seats. So he squatted and sat down on the carpet right up front. (Although such behavior would have been perfectly acceptable at a college fellowship, this was a scenario this particular congregation had never witnessed before!). By now, the people seemed uptight, and the tension in the air was thickening.

Right about the time Bill had taken his “seat,” a deacon began slowly making his way down the aisle from the back of the sanctuary. The deacon was in his 80s, had silver-gray hair, a three-piece suit and a pocket watch.

He was a godly man, very elegant, dignified and courtly. He walked with a cane and, as he neared the boy, church members thought, you can't blame him for what he's going to do. How can you expect a man of his age and background to understand some college kid on the floor?

It took a long time for the man to reach the boy. The church was utterly silent except for the clicking of his cane. You couldn't even hear anyone breathing. All eyes were on the deacon.

But then, they saw the elderly man drop his cane on the floor. With great difficulty, he sat down on the floor next to Bill and worshipped with him. Everyone in the congregation choked up with emotion. When the minister gained control, he told the people, "What I am about to preach, you will never remember. What you've just seen, you'll never forget."

I haven't had that happen to me yet, but I can say that I have seen things just as powerful as that at funerals, in nursing homes and hospital rooms, in the confessional, and at youth events. And that is the power of God's love which meets a person in a moment of need, and transforms them.

That is what this season of Advent is about. It is a season of hope, peace and reconciliation. And this theme runs throughout our readings this week. From Baruch, the prophet gives the people who are in exile a message of hope: that God loves them. We hear “put on the splendor of glory from God forever...God will show all the earth your splendor; you will be named by God forever.” In Paul’s letter to the Philippians, he emphasizes that God is with them and that while work of being a Christian isn’t always easy, God “will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus.” And in the Gospel, we meet a man who probably looked a bit like Bill, John the Baptist, who we are told “proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” People come to John in the desert and are baptized to encounter God, and to begin a new way of life. Saint John the Baptist ushers in the age of the Gospels, the age of Jesus our savior with us as he prepared the disciples and his followers for the rest of time. Now, we living in the age of the Church, we continue Jesus’ mission to bring the Good News of the Gospel to our brothers and sisters in the world today.

The takeaways for us are this season invites us to again encounter God, and bring Him into the world.

Becky doesn't share much about Bill in her story about who he was, or what his background was. But what is clear is that he was a seeker. That's what led him to the church; that's what led him to not walk out of it but to walk right to the front and be there at the service. All of us are seeking God, which is why we are here, but as I shared last week and at the penance service, sometimes we can fear letting God into our lives fully. It's not as if He doesn't know all that we go through, but sometimes we can feel like we have to hide certain things, or just keep them buried. But notice Baruch tells us how God will make the mountains low and fill in the valleys; it speaks of the power of God to liberate. Only one hill remains, the one in which Jerusalem, in Baruch's vision, is to stand robed with the glory of God. We can think of ourselves as on that hill. The fulfillment John announces is the infant who lies in the manger. The infant who will grow and reign in triumph as he dies on a cross outside the walls of Jerusalem. The robe is the grace of God, and when we hear on Christmas "unto you is born this day, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord," to prepare for that it's worth contemplating that we in fact, need saving. So remember God wipes away our sins, so don't fear turning them over to God. Confession times are extended next week, and other area parishes are also having penance services over the next couple of weeks. Even if you don't have time to go to

make an individual confession, make a regular act of contrition, and think about your sins and struggles at Mass especially prior to receiving Communion. We do this not to be shamed, but to be liberated - recognizing that we are the reason Jesus came, and He loves us so much. Sometimes the hardest person to forgive is ourself, so rather than keep things hidden, turn them over to the Savior who wants to meet you where you are at. And as you do that though, also look ahead. Receiving God's grace and forgiveness requires a change; people would meet John the Baptist in the desert, and then go forward and live a changed life. Moving closer to Christmas, we should think about what in our lives we also need to change permanently.

With that though it is so important to also look for ways to preach sermons without words. Earlier last week, we had the feast of Saint Nicholas, who of course became the model for Santa Claus and the bringing of gifts. He was a bishop of Myra, an ancient Greek town in modern Turkey. He inherited a sizable amount of money when his parents died and he was still a young man. A neighbor lost all his money, and needed to support his three daughters who could not find husbands because of their poverty; so at intervals Nicholas gave them gold for a dowry. He threw a bag of gold in

the window at night, and did the same for the second and the third; at the last time the father was on the watch, recognized his benefactor and overwhelmed Nicholas with his gratitude. This happened because Nicholas was looking for ways to bring love to the lives of others. Like him, we need to be on the lookout as well. Seeing extended family, going to the work parties and sending out the cards this year, maybe you can look at the list and extend a hand to someone in need, or extend forgiveness to those who have wronged you. Or maybe there's someone who needs help but can't find the courage to ask for it. Perhaps there's just someone who's lonely who is never visited. Opening our eyes there are many people like Bill all around us who need the light of God's love brought into their lives, and Advent gives us an opportunity to think about how we can do that not just at the holidays but throughout the year.

As I said, I've seen some very powerful moments over the course of my priesthood, and you've seen the same things too in your homes and with your families. By now many of you probably have the tree decorated and have put the manger out. As you look at the Christ child in your home or at Mass on Christmas, never forget the whole reason He came was for you and me. To dispel the darkness with the light of His love, and to forever

triumph over sin through His life, death and resurrection. So open your eyes to that love which we receive a foretaste of in Holy Communion, and may we never forget what we see - love given for us - but also never forget that the love also requires a response, to bring the light of God's love into the world by seeking out those who need to see it.