

IF I GAVE A SERMON

by Mike Finley

God is calling us, but no matter how we crane our head, we can't make out what he is saying. The moment we turn to see where the sound is coming from, it's gone. We cup our hand to our ear -- nothing. We conk our head with the butt of a palm -- nothing.

Yet something *is* happening. Perhaps he isn't calling us the way he famously called to Abraham or Mohammed or Paul. No burning bush. No column of cloud. No involuntary dismount. No cadres of scribbling scribes. But he is calling nonetheless.

These are some of the ways God lets us know.

Someone doing you a kindness for no apparent reason, that's God.

The hummingbird poised in midair by the feeder is God.

The beginning of a familiar symphony that you know will cut through to your heart.

A joke so funny the milk shoots out your nose.

A lesson that you've been dying to learn for years.

A baby crying, face and fists both clenched.

A dog cocking its head, struggling to comprehend what you are saying to him.

The breeze stirring the lilac bush in spring.

Wonderful lovemaking, just when you thought you had exhausted every possibility.

A movie you have seen a dozen times that still makes you cry.

A loved one and you blurting out the same syllables at the same time, and then laughing.

A letter arriving from long ago and far away.

A cat nursing her litter among the shoes on the closet floor.

The life-maintaining exchange of sodium and potassium between cell membranes.

The patient crawl of a slug on a stone.

An encouraging word from an unexpected source.

Two runs down, a ninth inning upset – the crowd goes crazy.

Snow falling silently outside the bedroom window.

And it isn't just the nice things. God calls to us in pain and paradox, too.

God calls us with despair, until the fist we are shaking is at him. It is the only way, sometimes, to get through.

He calls us with trouble, which is so often the turning point in our lives. Until we bottom out, and realize how useless our struggles are by themselves, God was remote and inaccessible. Suddenly, when we are in anguish, he is there, whispering our name. Out of the depths of our misery, a sudden hope.

He blesses the scientist with the ever deepening wonder of the world, and the quest for a unified explanation that brings all theories together into one.

He even blesses the atheist, by giving him clarity and self-reliance to go his lonely way. Who could be an atheist all by himself? So atheism itself becomes a proof of God.

All these things are God calling to you, fits of goodness attacking you every day of your life, bolts of meaning that ask you to take notice, intimations of company that want you to respond.

In all these ways, and thousands of others, something is tapping on our windows, trying to get our attention. Something is trying to get through to us. Something is trying to break through our insistence that there is no God, that good and bad are basically the same, that we are just punching the clock in this short shift life, but in the meantime we must strive to be likable and inoffensive so people don't hurt us, and we do what we can to stay on the lucky side of things, so hopefully we won't die too horribly.

Now that's a plan. And a workable one, too, if that tapping would just stop.

We are under continuous assault from God, like a mischievous virus that wants into our systems, to mess with our data. But these loving attacks seldom seem to get through. Our anti-virus software keeps out the worst. And we have it configured so it works passively, without our even having to think about it. We have figured out a way to give God the finger without actually having to lift one.

Are we any worse off for this achievement? Sure, it would be interesting if a pillar of fire camped out outside our apartment building parking lot. Wouldn't our friends be amazed? Wouldn't pictures be taken? Wouldn't it be something to contemplate, idly and at one's leisure? But not if it required some actual followup on our part. "God, this is all well and good, and I quite see your point, but you've completely melted my Audi, and we can't have that."

We think we're open-minded. We think we give the idea of God a fair hearing. Hey, it doesn't get much fairer than us. If you don't believe us, ask us.

But in fact we have set up defenses against God that dwarf the immense Maginot Line the French built between the two world wars to keep the Germans in Germany.

We have intellectual mine-fields, an underwater jungle of protective devices that detect and destroy any craft bigger than an inner tube.

We have psychic defenses against God more impressive than America's "Star Wars" network of space-based ray guns, poised to disintegrate incoming nuclear-tipped missiles.

In every way we build intricate, elaborate, multiply redundant, multi-tiered defenses of mind and heart that keep the voice of God from reaching our ears, from touching our hearts, from requiring a response.

How likely is one to hear God than when they've invested their entire bloated defense budget to prevent that very thing from happening? We are insulated against contamination with a six foot shell of duct tape and plastic sheeting.

Despite all these defenses against penetration of our perimeter, we go about our lives as if we were just the most reasonable, innocent, big-hearted people in the universe. It's quite amazing, how we do this.

Truly, with all the hardware and software we have dedicated to ensuring our deafness against God's interventions, it's amazing that God still want to get through to us at all. What part of SCRAM! doesn't he understand?

And really, what's the attraction? What does he want, that he keeps dialing our number? They say he likes praise. That seems weird. Create a universe so one species will develop to the point where it can flatter you. Whee.

Atonement? I haven't done anything wrong. He wants to give *me* a giant hug? There, there, big fellow.

Money? What does God need with my money? (And yet, they never lose an opportunity to ask, do they?)

Understanding why God is interested in us is a mystery beyond the scope of this project. I personally don't have a clue about this. If you think about it, it's like having a coffee can full of worms for friends, and catering to the worms in every conceivable way. Do you have enough manure to burrow through? Can I drizzle some water on you? It doesn't make a lot of sense. A better book will have to tackle that one.

All we are going to do here is examine some of the software and hardware we have installed to keep God off the premises, figure out what makes us commit such extraordinary resources to this defense, and suggest ways that some of the array might be dismantled or disarmed.

Because, let's be honest – if God is really trying to get through to us, that's pretty important. We need to learn to listen better, if only to be polite.

The concept of reciprocity with God has the potential to be equal parts scary and icky. But if it really is God on the other side of the door, we have to find a way to let him in.