

Traveling companion: Thump! Thump! in the night

Fr. Michael Tracey

My 3:30 a.m. morning bike rides along the beach are usually uneventful, except for the odd barking dog, the lack of automotive traffic and the rumbling of the waves. Of late, lightening and thunder over the Gulf and the line of fishing boats along the horizon keep me company.

On Friday morning, all that changed. On the return trip, bolstered by a gentle breeze on my back, I sped down the concrete bike path. In the distance – about two miles away – I noticed the full beam lights of a car or truck. I continue to peddle on but the lights didn't seem to get any closer. Minutes later, I finally saw it approaching. As it approached, I heard a continuous thumping sound. Thinking it might be a truck with a trailer, I didn't pay much attention to it.

When the car approached closer, I sensed that the driver was driving on a flat tire. It approached at about five miles an hour. About to pass it, I heard a voice. I stopped and the voice called out for directions.

“How do I get to Highway 53?” a female voice shouted as she stopped the car. I turned back to the car. It was a light brown Buick car that showed its age. The front bonnet was not completely closed. I found the source of the thumping sound.

Still mounted on my bike, I directed her to Nicholson Avenue in Waveland and then onto Highway 603 and from there to Highway 53. Confused by my directions, she asked me to write down the directions for her. I asked her for a piece of paper and pen to write them on.

She began to fumble through her front seat area for pen and paper. Then, she turned on the car's inside light. She looked at me and said, “Don't worry! I am not on drugs!.” “Don't worry, “ I said to myself, “your voice betrays you.” Her slurred speech spoke volumes of her latest ingestion.

While searching for pen and paper, she continued to talk. “I'm forty-six years old. I have three children. They are eight, ten and fifteen. I am trying to get home to see them.”

Continuing to search for pen and paper, she asked, “ Am I holding you up?” I said, “No!” Then, in a very slurred voice, she said, “Thank you for helping me. I will give you my phone number and if I can help you in any way, just call me.”

Finally she produced what looked like a pen. In fact, it was a pencil with no real point on it. I looked at it as she handed it to be and waited for a piece of paper. Eventually, she pulled a checkbook out of her bag. I noticed it had no remaining checks to be written on it. “I can write the direction on the back of it,” I suggested. She handed it to me and I began to write. With the blunt, marker-like pencil, it was impossible to write down directions. Then, I handed them to her and explained what I had written. She thanked me and said, “I know where that is.” I hopped on my bike and rode off into the soon-to-arise sun. As I did, I listened intently for the fading sounds of thump! Thump in the night until it echoed silence.

On the way home, my thoughts were filled with the encounter. I wondered if she would ever get to Highway 53. I wondered if she even realized she was driving on a flat tire at five miles an hour. Maybe the constant thumping inside her head from alcohol dulled the sound of the car's thumping sounds.

At Mass that morning, our first reading from 1 Kings 19 was ironic. It profiled the story of how Elijah encountered God, not in the strong and heavy wind; not in the earthquake; not in the fire that followed but “in the tiny whispering sound.”

Then, I realized that, earlier that morning, I too encountered God in the gentle, if not confusing whispers of a drunken lady trying to find her way home as her heart and her car went thump! Thump in the night.