

**The Final Answer
To the Question of Evil and
What If This IS the Best of All Possible Worlds?
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**Judges 9:8-15 (The oldest parable in the bible – How the bramble became king of the forest)
Deuteronomy 30:19**

We are part owners of a place on Lake Santa Fe, our share purchased with an inheritance we received from my mother's estate. It's a beautiful escape, a little house up on stilts surrounded by Cypress trees. We spent last weekend there.

While the lot is beautiful with spreading Live Oak trees and many old growth azaleas whose blooms are so bright they make your eyes hurt, it is also full of entangling vines – prickly vines, deeply rooted, thorny, bramble, briar vines. Last weekend, we engaged in our yearly vinectomy. I love the satisfaction of getting hold of a solid vine, tracing it down to its source, following it under the azaleas until I get to its giant tumorous source and rip it out of the ground with a cheer of triumph. But it's also the kind of work that sends Sandy and me to a chiropractor, so this year we hired Adam Williams to help us. He got the worst of the work.

Vine pulling always makes me think of a bible study I attended when I was in high school at my church in River Edge, New Jersey. The visiting leader shared what is the oldest parable in the bible, the story of how the thorny bramble vine became king of the forest. I have hunted for that story ever since that day. This week thanks to an extra measure of motivation and the gift of Google, I found it for this sermon. It's from the book of Judges, the seventh book in the bible.

Here's the setting. Gideon, a noble leader who had ruled over Israel for a good long time had died of old age. There was a mess in the succession. The Israelites woke up one day wondering how in the world they wound up with the miserable Abimelech as their leader. Jotham, the youngest of Gideon's seventy sons, told this parable, the oldest in the bible.

The trees once went out to anoint a king over themselves. So they said to the olive tree. "Reign over us." The olive tree answered them, "Shall I stop producing my rich oil by which gods and mortals are honored, and go to sway over the trees?"

Then the trees said to the fig tree, "You come and reign over us." But the fig tree answered them, "Shall I stop producing my sweetness and my delicious fruit, and go to sway over the trees?"

Then the trees said to the vine, "You come and reign over us."

But the vine said to them, "Shall I stop producing my wine that cheers gods and mortals, and go to sway over the trees?"

Then the trees said to the bramble, "You come reign over us."

And the bramble said to the trees, "If in good faith you are anointing me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade; but if not let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon." (Judges 9:8-15)

The point of the story is that when we wonder why the leaders of our institutions are like bramble vines that scratch and entangle everything around them, it's because none of the rest of us will take those leadership positions.

Whether it's national, state, county, city, or even the university, if we wonder how we wound up with the leaders we have, it's because we, like the olive, fig, and even grape, felt we had more important things to do than take on the leadership in the communities in which we live and work. We get the leaders we deserve because we think we are too busy or important to do the work of leadership ourselves. (The only place where this isn't true is this church, where the best people always say yes when asked to serve, including your ministerial staff.)

I always think of that story when I pull vines. I'm going to get back to it later.

Meanwhile, Sandy, Adam and I finished our day of labor. I basked in the gift of being outside, being healthy enough to do yard work, and also being able to pay Adam to do the worst of it. We had loaded a utility trailer we borrowed from Julie Thaler and Carol Barron to the limit, and I, filthy, and exhausted, drove it to the Alachua County dump about 3:15 on that Thursday afternoon.

At the dump, I backed up to the mountain of yard waste, turned off the ignition, pulled out the keys and thought, "I don't want to take these keys with me. What if they fell out of my pocket and got lost in all this trash?" Then, in a moment that will live in the Reimer annals of infamy, I pushed the electronic door button that I thought **unlocked** the car (this is a new car for us), got out and swung the door shut with keys and my cell phone on the front seat. With a sickening thud, the door locked.

And there stood I dumbfounded at the dump.

It all worked out, and I'll explain how, later. But before a rescue could be organized, I had an hour and a half to sit in the back of a trailer I had emptied by hand (the rake and pitchfork were also in the car) thinking about how I would preach a sermon on the two final questions of the Burning Questions series, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" and the parallel question "Is this the best of all possible worlds?"

Whenever we invite questions of faith, "Why do bad things happen to good people? Or why is there evil?" keeps popping up.

The problem of evil is known as "Theodicy", the question of how a good God could allow such terrible things as happen in this world to occur. There is a line in Archibald MacLeish's play "JB" based on the life of Job, which captures the problem. "If God is God, He is not good. If God is good, He is not God. Take the even take the odd."

The point is that if God is all powerful and allows such evil as we encounter in this world, then God could not be good. Or if on the other hand, God can't stop the evil in the world because God just doesn't have the power to do so, then God can't truly be God as we understand an all powerful God to be.

As I've said before, I believe in panentheism. Theism sees God standing outside the world. Pantheism sees God in and defined by all things, totally present in everything in the world. Panentheism sees God as in and present in all things, but not confined to or defined by the things of the world. God is neither a puppeteering ruler outside the world, nor is God completely defined by being the spirit in the trees, the earth, the skies and seas. Panentheism says that God is in the world but more than the world. This is at the heart of all Celtic spirituality.

Panentheism says that God does not cause the cancer, nor the war, nor the hurricane. At the same time, God's face is never absent from us in the cancer, nor the war, nor the hurricane. God is always with us, pulling us toward our wholeness and healing in whatever way possible that does not destroy the freedom of our humanity or of nature.

Part of the meaning of resurrection is that God does not bring goodness and healing because of the evil and suffering, but in spite of it. The evil of this world never has the last word. The light shines in the darkness. Even if the only healing left is life eternal, it always triumphs.

The best summary I can think of how God works in suffering is this. When William Sloane Coffin, Jr.'s son died in a car crash and a well meaning sympathizer said, "Sometimes I just don't understand God's will", Coffin in the anger of his grief thundered back, "You bet your life you don't understand God's will. Do you think it was God's will that my son Alex had one too many beers when he got into that car? Do you think it was God's will that Alex's car was missing a windshield wiper, that the guard rail was broken on that road that night and the street light was burned out? No," said Coffin, "I believe that when Alex took that turn too fast and his car sank into Boston Harbor, God's heart was the first to break."

That's my final answer to the question of evil. God does not make bad things happen to teach us a lesson or show us a greater good. God's heart breaks as our hearts break, and God then works to heal broken hearts and broken lives.

But there is never actually a final answer to why there is evil in the world. It is always an ongoing question for the person of faith. I believe in God who is good, but not all powerful, who created a world in which we and nature have the freedom to destroy ourselves and each other, and God who nevertheless remains present and creating among and with us. Yet the question of why of terrible things happen in a world lovingly created by God can never be completely answered.

On the other hand, we tend not to ask the question which the absolute denial of God can never answer, "Why is there good in the world?" If there is no God, why is there such overwhelming beauty around us? Why do we love and

give to one another against all odds? Why is the community of faith so beautiful as to call us to it?

And this leads me to end this sermon with a brief answer to the question, “Is this truly the best of all possible worlds?”

In the 1759, the French writer Voltaire wrote the novel Candide, basically to shred the idea that this was the best of all possible worlds. I remember reading Candide in my college Literary Foundations class and loving its harsh anti-sentimental satire because, well, I was a college sophomore. The main character, Candide, goes on a journey where he witnesses or experiences whippings, unjust executions, epidemic disease and a massive earthquake. He continues to insist that “everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.” When he tries to save an Anabaptist, someone who believes in baptism by full immersion, from drowning in the bay of Lisbon, his mentor, Dr. Pangloss, explains that this bay was created expressly for the Anabaptist to drown in.

Meanwhile the idea that this is the best of all possible worlds was developed a century earlier by the philosopher Gottfried Leibniz. Rationally, Leibniz said, there would be no world if God did not choose to create a world. God therefore must have formed the best possible world, for how could God have created anything less?

Leibniz never argued that there was no evil in the world, as Voltaire suggested. Leibniz simply said that to have created the world any other way it would have had even more evil in it.

Leibniz believed that there is some deep and sufficient reason behind everything that is. Thomas Cathcart and Daniel Klein, in their book Plato and a Platypus Walk into a Bar: Understanding Philosophy Through Jokes explain this by saying that the reason it rains more in Seattle than it does in Albuquerque is because conditions A,B, and C make it impossible for it to be any other way. Leibniz would argue that everything fits together, and if it were different, this would not be a “uni” verse. The diversity of our creation is what holds it together. Cathcart and Klein summarize this by saying, “The optimist believes this is the best of all possible worlds. The pessimist fears this is so.” (Thomas Cathcart & Daniel Klein, Plato and a Platypus Walk into a Bar, 2007, p. 19)

Which takes me back to 4:30, Thursday, February 24, sitting in an empty yard waste trailer behind a locked car in a dump that will close at 5:00, with Sandy in Melrose with no car to come and rescue me, as I wondered: Could this be the best of all possible worlds?

Consider the options. Should God have created a world in which I had no freedom to make the bad decision to throw my keys on the console of my car? Should God have created a world where Hondas had the same locks as my old Ford so I wouldn't have pushed “lock” instead of “unlock” on the door armrest? Should God have created a world where all the good trees in the forest never let the thorny vines overtake the azaleas, so I Sandy, Adam, and I would not have had to spend a day clearing them out?

What would a world look like where all our needs were taken care of, all decisions, stupid or smart, were taken from us, and where no vines with thorns ever entered a realm where they weren't wanted?

With this in mind, I finish my story of the dump. About fifteen minutes after I locked myself out of my car, a guy in a pickup truck pulled along side of me, and he loaned me his cell phone. Sandy by the way had just gotten a new cell phone and I didn't know her new number. So I called Lisa at the church office. Lisa called Sandy. Sandy sat down to figure out what to do, without a car, in Melrose.

At 4:30 a silver Prius pulled into my particular section of the dump, driven by Ron Haase. Sandy was in the back seat. The only people Sandy knew to call in Melrose were the Ron and Janet Haase. Sandy had asked them if she could borrow their car for a rescue. They went one better. They were just about to drive to Gainesville to attend a Gator baseball game, and they'd drop her off at the dump. They greeted me joyfully, with no blame of finger pointing about what I should have done with my keys in the first place.

I was saved.

This is all small change in terms of the world's tragedies and triumphs, but it was a nice microcosm of them both.

In this world I had the freedom to make the unfortunate decision by which I locked myself outside my car. In this same world, a stranger came by who offered me a phone. In this world I had a church, and angels - Lisa, Sandy and the Haase's who had a car. And all of them had enough care and compassion to come help me.

My final word is that evil will always happen. It will rock us. Good will always happen, it will astound us. As Deuteronomy 30:19 forever reminds me, God says, "I have put before you life and death, blessings and curses, therefore choose life that you and your descendants may live."

Prayer –

O God we bring the daily questions of everyday living. Are we loved? Are we loving? Will you fix what is broken in my life?

We bring our wishes that we could fix the pain in our friends and loved ones, so they could hurt less.

We hear your answer of yes from within, not so much to the specific questions, but as a path. We hear you say, "*Choose life and trust. Grow in service and love. Be thankful for the gift. Dare to risk. Suffer well. Bless the world with laughter and tears. Know not what I am or who I am but that I am and I am with you.*"

Call us together now, in these common words to your ancient prayer.
*Heavenly Father, Heavenly Mother,
Holy and blessed is your true name.
We pray for your reign of peace to come,
We pray that your good will be done.
Let heaven and earth become one.*

*Give us this day the bread we need.
Give bread to those who have none.
Let forgiveness flow like a river between us
From each one to each one to each one.
Lead us to holy innocence beyond the evil of our days.
Come quickly, Mother, Father, come
For yours is the power and the glory and the mercy.
Forever your name is All in One.
(translation of the Lord's Prayer by Parker Palmer)*