

God's action and ours

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*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Hannan's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

For those who are uncomfortable with any suggestion that our future is in our own hands, this might be one of those weeks to abandon the assigned texts on theological grounds. (It is extra tempting given the occasion of “Rally Sunday.”) In Deuteronomy we hear that if we obey we shall live and be blessed, but if our heart turns away we shall perish. And then very directly, “Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.”

Really? Our mortality, our survival, is up to us? This irritates my lifelong conditioning that we are fully dependent on God and not ourselves. The alternative first reading from Jeremiah is no more helpful:

If that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it . . . but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it.

Surprisingly, in a text that intends to highlight God’s freedom—God’s primary agency—one gets a whiff of prosperity gospel or decision theology.

Even the Gospel reads this way when read in conjunction with these texts. Jesus essentially says discipleship is dependent upon choosing to 1) “hate” your mother and father, 2) carry the cross and follow and 3) give away all of your possessions.

So yes, one reading of these texts suggests that our fate is dependent on our own actions. But we know the overarching message of the gospel is that our future is fully dependent on Jesus’ death on the cross. So what do we do when the pericope

contradicts our theology (and vice versa)? This reminds me of one of our recurring homiletical challenges: Do we preach the gospel or the text?

In [this week's Century lectionary column](#), I tried to honor that our choices and actions matter to God—but without compromising God's role as the protagonist in our lives. Our preparatory work for discipleship is not a first step but a follow-up step to God's work in our lives. Preachers would do well to note carefully their language so that hearers will know unmistakably that, while we have an important role in our relationship with God, our future is primarily dependent on God. This is good news.