

Apostolic fate

By [Katherine Willis Pershey](#)

May 15, 2012

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Pershey'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.

I was drying dishes and absentmindedly singing the song that had been stuck in my head for days when my husband suddenly came barreling down the staircase and into the kitchen. Looking frantic, he asked me what had happened. We were both confused; he was convinced that I had cried out in pain, and he fully expected to walk in on a grisly cooking incident.

We quickly realized the source of the miscommunication. The song I'd been singing was Lady Gaga's "Judas," and I sounded like a lady in distress as I belted out, "Judas, Juda-a-a."

Like a lot of Lady Gaga's work, "Judas" is as complicated as it is catchy. It's an ambivalent love song if there ever was one: "I've learned love is like a brick. You can/ build a house or sink a dead body." Switch out fate for love, and you pretty much have the gist of this passage from Acts. Fate, it seems, is the driving force. The Holy Spirit foretold the treachery of Judas. He fulfilled the prophecy--the dead body not sunk but hanged--but did he do it of his own volition? What if he'd wanted to be loyal to his teacher? Could he have respectfully turned down his part in Christ's passion?

Likewise, fate apparently directs the selection of Matthias as the replacement apostle. Sure, the disciples establish basic criteria, identifying two qualified candidates for the position. They pray--not for guidance in making a decision, but to know the decision God has already made. Lots are cast, and Matthias wins--joining the ranks of the men who are the official builders of the church.

The Bible study I facilitate has been slowly reading through the book of Acts. We struggled to understand this brief bit of administrative business tucked between the stories of Christ's ascension and the Holy Spirit's arrival. We grasped the need to address the opening left by Judas's betrayal, but we were flummoxed by the theological implications of the whole thing. How, one of our participants demanded, could a man be predestined for evil? It isn't fair. It isn't right! Whatever happened to free will?

I equivocated; perhaps it was *inevitable* that someone would betray Jesus, not *predestined*. I'm not entirely sure what difference this makes, but somehow inevitability seems less constricting than predestination--whether the inevitability is for good or evil.

The feast day of St. Matthias is February 24. It is widely considered to be the luckiest day of the year, a day for upping the ante and investing in lottery tickets. Few but Lady Gaga feast for Judas, the betrayer. The unlucky one.