KEEPING PROMISES

Darren Wright

“In the Habit” session for use with devozine meditations for May 18–24, 2015.

MAKING THE CONNECTION

“In an interview with Bill Moyers (http://www.brainpickings.org/2014/03/14/martha-nussbaum-bill-moyers-world-of-ideas/), Martha Nussbaum said, ‘Being a human means accepting promises from other people and trusting that other people will be good to you. When that is too much to bear, it is always possible to retreat into the thought, “I’ll live for my own comfort, for my own revenge, for my own anger, and I just won’t be a member of society anymore.” That really means, “I won’t be a human being anymore.”’

“You see people doing that today where they feel that society has let them down, and they can’t ask anything of it, and they can’t put their hopes on anything outside themselves. You see them actually retreating to a life in which they think only of their own satisfaction, and maybe the satisfaction of their revenge against society. But the life that no longer trusts another human being and no longer forms ties to the political community is not a human life any longer.’

“Where I live, we have recently gone through a state election; our national elections happened back in 2013. People are aware of promises that flow freely around election times, sometimes too freely. When all is said and done, are political promises worth anything?

“How do we hold people to their promises? How do we decide which promises matter? Do all promises matter?” —Darren

MEET THE WRITER

Darren Wright is a Uniting Church Youth Worker serving in the Riverina Presbytery in New South Wales, Australia, as the Presbytery Education and Discipleship Worker. Darren has previously worked in congregational ministry, high school chaplaincy, and local government as a youth worker. His interests include music (Moby, Radiohead, Ben Harper, The National, Muse, All India Radio), film (MegaMind, Harry Potter, How to Train your Dragon, Scott Pilgrim, Big Hero 6), TV (Chuck, Doctor Who, Big Bang Theory, Community, Agents of SHIELD), theology, pop-culture, young people in at-risk areas, and the connection among the church, theology, and pop culture.
STUFF YOU WILL NEED
• Post-It notes (I carry these around with me all the time)
• markers
• Bibles
• copies of the closing prayer

PLUGGED IN
+ Many movies and books refer to promises. Liar, Liar is a movie about what happens when a father, who is renowned for lying and breaking promises, is magically changed into someone who cannot ever tell a lie. (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0119528/)


+ The Work of the People also has a good collection of videos that explore the idea of promises. “Why We Make Promises” (http://www.theworkoftheprople.com/why-we-make-promises) touched me.

+ Watch television for a day, and take note of all the promises advertisements make—for example: no more pimples, no more being alone, everyone will love you, we’ll find your match, you’ll lose weight.

CHECKING IN
Invite the group to discuss their reflections on the readings in devozine this week:

What meditation made you think more about the promises you’ve made?
What meditation made you think about promises that have been made to you?  
What promises have you made this week?

Invite group members to think of different kinds of promises (wedding, baptism, friendship, promise to do something, promises that advertisements make). Distribute post-it notes and markers. Invite people to write as many promises as they can, recording each promise on a separate Post-It Note.

When everyone is finished, ask group members to stick their Post-It notes on the wall. Then invite them to work together to sort the promises into categories. These are possible categories (feel free to add others):
• promises that matter, promises that don’t matter
• promises that are easy, difficult, impossible to keep
• individual promises, group promises
• promises we believe might be kept, promises we think will not be kept
EXPLORING THE WORD
Scripture: Genesis 15, 1 Samuel 1:1–11

Discuss:
What promises have you read about in the Bible?
Who made the biblical promises? Who received them?
In which categories from the previous exercise would you place them?

Invite the group to explore a couple promises that were made in the Bible:
+ The promise in Genesis 15 made by God
+ The promise in 1 Samuel 1:1–11 made by a woman desperate for a child

Then discuss:
What do we learn about promises from these stories?
What do we learn about the promises we make?
What promises are too hard to keep?

SHARING IN PRAYER
Invite group members to pray together Hannah’s prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1–10 (NRSV), saying, “As you pray, imagine that you, like Hannah, are praising God for promises made to you.”

“My heart exults in the Lord;
my strength is exalted in my God.
My mouth derides my enemies,
because I rejoice in my victory.

“There is no Holy One like the Lord,
no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.
Talk no more so very proudly,
let not arrogance come from your mouth;
for the Lord is a God of knowledge,
and by him actions are weighed.
The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble gird on strength.
Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.
The barren has borne seven,
but she who has many children is forlorn.
The Lord kills and brings to life;
he brings down to Sheol and raises up.
The Lord makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low, he also exalts.
He raises up the poor from the dust; 
    he lifts the needy from the ash heap, 
to make them sit with princes 
    and inherit a seat of honor.
For the pillars of the earth are the Lord’s, 
    and on them he has set the world.

“He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, 
    but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; 
for not by might does one prevail.
The Lord! His adversaries shall be shattered; 
    the Most High will thunder in heaven.
The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; 
    he will give strength to his king, 
    and exalt the power of his anointed.”

After the group members have prayed Hannah’s prayer, invite them to create a prayer of their own as a way of thanking God for all the promises made to them.

TAKING IT FURTHER
• Spend an hour with the group, recording promises made by advertisements online. Discuss: Do these promises mean anything to you? What happens when companies make promises they cannot keep?
• Invite group members to pay attention to promises made during the next election campaign. Make a list of what promises matter to you and to your community. Create a plan to encourage the candidates to keep their promises; write letters, organize voters, canvass neighborhoods, raise awareness of issues, and so on.

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