

Ruminations

Spring-Summer 2024/5



SALTBUSH
UNITING THE SCATTERED COMMUNITY

Promises



Contributors

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Rev. Julie Lawton-Gallard started ministry at the age of 19 as a youth worker. She has served the Uniting church in Crookwell, the Riverina Presbytery, Wagga Wagga, Galston and Cobar. In March 2009 she was ordained as a minister of the word and served at Tahmoor Uniting Church and Camden Country at Camden Country. In June of 2020, Julie discerned the need to move to Southport.

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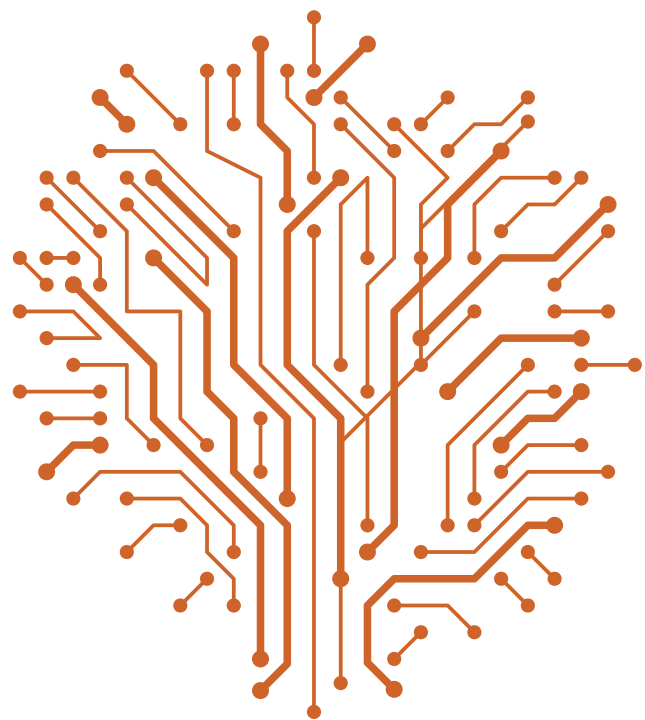
Nathan Tyson works with the Synod of NSW & ACT in the role of Director, First Peoples Strategy and Engagement. Nathan is an Aboriginal man who has spent most of his life in Sydney and is of Anaiwon/Gomerioi descent.

Rev. Steve Everist grew up in dairy country of the North of the North Island of New Zealand and recently has returned with his wife Deb to the dairy country of the South Coast of NSW at Gerringong (there's surfing there as well). Steve has worked mostly in family ministries over the last 40 years and has become a little obsessed with how we re-invigorate the process of discipleship in our churches.



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Editors Introduction: Promises

Rev. Tim Jensen | Scattered Community Minister

Welcome to our Spring/Summer Edition of Ruminations with the theme of Promises.

Rev. Julie Lawton-Gallard begins her article with 'Promise, such a big word.' Promise is such a big word, with big expectations, big hopes and potentially big disappointments. It is such a heavy social contract that relies on trust reliability and honesty. It can strengthen our relationships and be a great source of dependability and safety. And we know it is often used as to manipulate others into relying upon the relationship. So many people will stay in abusive relationship because of the other promising they will change but never do. Promises can come at a cost, if not kept, trust is damaged or lost. If they are kept in unhealthy relationships, a promise could feel like being captured with no way out. Of course we see this in many leaders of all types, political, business, government and unfortunately the church. It was Napoleon Bonaparte who said, "If your want to be a success in the world, promise everything, deliver nothing."

As we explore the theme of Promise in this issue of Ruminations, we are aware of the complexity of what promises mean and how they are understood. The contributing articles begin with a theological exploration then moving into people's personal experiences. As we are entering into the season of Advent, a time of promise, expectation and justice, our final articles are practical, pragmatic and thought provoking. How do you experience promise in your life?

When we promise it is usually about something from someone. A promise to keep a secret, a promise to keep a contract, a promise to fulfil an obligation, a promise of fidelity in a relationship, a promise to change, there are so many reasons for a promise. We promise something to others in the hope of a return, of honouring our promise or of delivering on what was promised. It is reasonable to assume that this is how promises work. We live in a world full of these expectations. But then might interpret the same understanding of promise onto God. How often have we promised to pray more, be more actively involved in the life of the church, be a better Christian if God would answer a specific prayer request. We have this kind of tit for tat understanding of our relationship with God.

While attending a wedding and sitting with a group of people a bit younger than us who were all part of the same church as the bride and groom. I struck up a conversation with the person next to me. He talked about how involved he was in serving in the life of the church. The young man spoke of his business and how it was a struggle, but he was holding on to the promises of God that he would be blessed with good fortune. I was curious where God promised to make him rich. Our conversation ended and apart from polite manners no one else talked to me.

We expect God to deliver on our prayers. After all isn't this what God has promised to do? As we read in Luke 11:11 "And of which of you that is a father shall his son ask a loaf, and he give him a stone? or a fish, and he for a fish give him a serpent? What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead of a fish?" Often our expectation of a promise is minimised to God fulfilling our wish list. It might be sobering to consider to what degree we understand the nature of God as merely a divine entity that exists only to serve me and my desires.

Maybe the promises of God are those which are about relationship. More about presence, about being alongside and walking, sitting and just being with us. That God giving us fish and not a snake is not about getting what we asked for but the loving nature of God and God's desire that we know we are loved. To be loved might also mean that promise is not allowing us to languish in our own self-serving quagmire, but calling us to journey the way of wisdom, compassion, love, reconciliation, understanding and hope. To know the fullness of our own humanity: what an awesome, rich and painful promise. A promise that is about challenging us to consider others, whether neighbour, friend or creation. Promise reassuring us that God remains resolute in their commitment to be in relationship with us, so that we know we are children of God.

Promise is such a big word, for people. But then we have the promise of God.

Tim

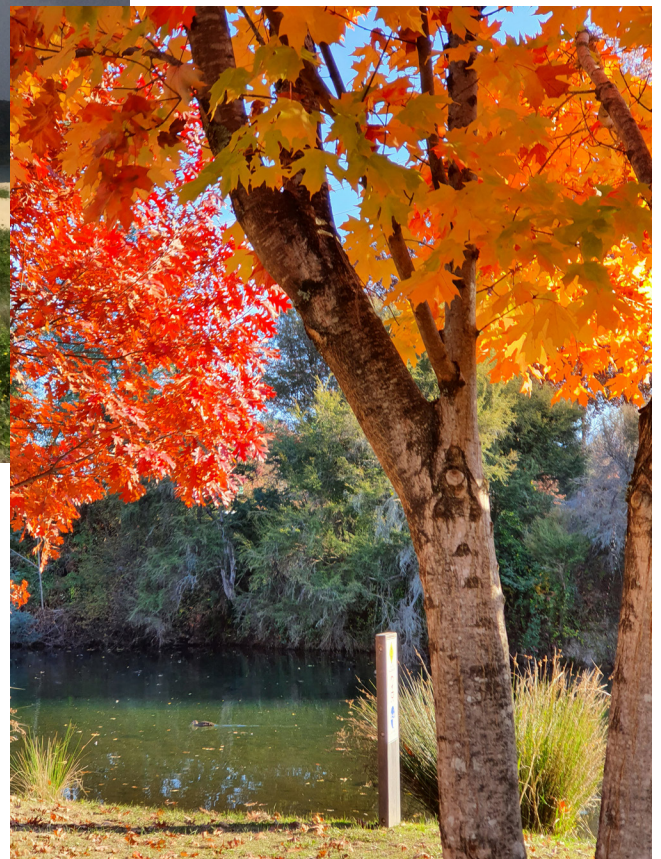
Reader's Letters - Experiences - Photos

We'd like to hear from you!

Send in a story of up to 200 words, or photo with caption to:
saltbush@nswact.uca.org.au*

This can either be on the theme of Promises, or on the topic of your choice.

*We will endeavour to include as many stories as possible, but cannot guarantee all submissions will be published.





News from Saltbush

Rev. Natasha He | Scattered Community Minister

Malo e lelei and greetings from the Saltbush team. Whether you are here often or a first-time reader, we want to extend our heartfelt welcome to you all.

Since our last Ruminations edition, we hosted our annual Saltbush retreat which provided an opportunity for our ministers and deacons to gather in a peaceful and reflective space. The theme of the retreat, "Dwelling, Discerning, and Discovering," set the tone for a fulfilling experience centred on personal growth, spiritual renewal, and community building. Throughout the four-day retreat, the attendees took part in various activities that aimed to build or rebuild connection, self-reflection, and spiritual exploration. These intimate gatherings generated a feeling of unity and camaraderie among the attendees, reminding them they are not alone in their rural, remote and coastal ministries.

We also held our Saltbush gathering in Colleambly. We had a wonderful group of people from across the Riverina presbytery. We engaged in heartfelt worship, and the gathering also provided a platform for thought-provoking conversations, where we delved into one of the Jacob stories in the Old Testament. These discussions were both enlightening and challenging, pushing us to broaden our perspectives and consider new ways to positively impact our communities and congregations. And of course shared a lovely meal together.



We are thrilled to announce the upcoming publication of Salt in The Wound,

a collection of stories that will take you on a transformative journey through Jacob's life. Immersed in a world filled with both challenges and blessings, Jacob navigates the trials and triumphs that shape his existence.

Salt in The Wound invites us to reflect on their own lives. It is a testament to our human experiences and the inherent capacity for growth and transformation that exists within us all. May you be captivated by Jacob's story as it unfolds, revealing the depths of the Holy Spirit and the power of resilience with God.

We look forward to our last gathering of the year in Yamba, in the Far North Coast Presbytery, on December Saturday, December 1st. You can join us in Yamba or online. Just go to our website to register. <https://saltbushcommunity.uca.org.au>



As we reflect on the year 2024, it has been a year that brought about positive transformations and a renewed sense of hope for the future. As we move into Advent, let us carry the lessons learned and continue to embrace the spirit of joy and newness in all our endeavours.

God's blessings to you all and thank you for journeying with us this year. We are grateful for your presence and support. As we enter 2025, we are filled with hope and excitement for what lies ahead. May our bonds deepen, and may we continue to walk alongside one another, sharing God's love and compassion with those around us. May our unity and dedication to serving others be a testament to the transforming spirit of faith and community.

In hope, peace and joy from the Saltbush team.

Natasha





Promises in the Old Testament

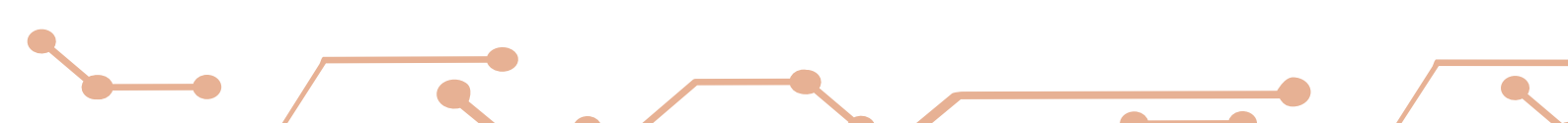
Rev. Dr Bec Lindsay | UTC Lecturer - Old Testament

“No Mum, I don’t just promise. I pinky promise.”

Thus begins many conversations in a house that includes a four-year-old. A subtle distinction between types of promises, how secure these are, and apparently the consequences of breaking them. (I am reliably informed that breaking a pinky promise leads to insomnia and nightmares!) The pinky promise gets pulled out when the four-year-old is trying very hard to secure something he wants: extra television on the guarantee of going to bed without fuss, for example. The pinky finger is offered as assurance of actions, beyond words alone.

The embodiment of promise in a small finger got me thinking about promise in the Hebrew Bible. The Biblical Hebrew words translated in English as promise are words whose root meaning is simply saying or speaking. This is reflected in English with the idea of a promise as keeping one’s word. When God hears, God acts (see Ex 2:23–25, for example). When God speaks, the words are true, with the implication including promise. No pinky is required, the speaking is enough. God’s action is assumed to follow because God is God. ‘I-am-who-I-am’ or ‘I-will-be-who-I-will-be’ is the name God gives to Moses (Ex 3:13–15). And the example of God’s presence with Abraham and Sarah and other patriarchs and matriarchs, or the example of God’s liberating actions in the exodus are pointed to in other parts of the Hebrew Bible as signs that God’s word can be trusted.

During the season of Advent and at Christmas, Christians often reflect on promises from the Old Testament, and marvel at the ways we connect these to the coming of God in Christ. Sometimes, however, we unmoor these texts from their wider Hebrew Bible story arcs, forgetting that they have context and meaning before the birth of Jesus. We read, for example, Zephaniah 3 which shouts out promise of God’s restoration and blessing upon the people, without first attending to the un-making of chapter 1. We often do not recognise the critique of leaders, in this instance perhaps those in the Kingdom of Judah who have profited from connection with the Assyrian empire. Or, we read about the town of Bethlehem in Micah 5:2, without attending to the turmoil caused by the Assyrian empire that is named in the surrounding verses.



I find helpful, here, an observation made by biblical scholar Steven L. McKenzie, who reminds us that prophetic texts from the Hebrew Bible are first and foremost “forthtelling, not foretelling.”¹ McKenzie goes on:

Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible was not primarily to predict the future — certainly not hundreds of years in advance — but rather to address specific social, political and religious circumstances in ancient Israel and Judah. This means there is no prediction of Christ in the Hebrew Bible. The writers of the New Testament and later Christian literature reinterpreted or reapplied the Hebrew prophecies... This is not to disparage these later Christian authors, however, for they were participating in a long-standing process of reinterpretation that goes back to the prophetic books themselves. (p. 124)

When we read the promises of God in the Hebrew Bible in twenty-first century Australia, we have to be careful. There’s a gap of time and space between us and these texts. We need to pay attention to these gaps, to understand what these words may have been addressing in a different time and space. With this in mind, we can contemplate how they may still speak to us in a different context. That means that for us to interpret the Hebrew Bible responsibly, we need to learn the history and culture and context in which it was formed and wrestled. We need to think about how geography of mountains, sea, desert, and fertile land are present in the stories. We need to understand the politics of empires walking through Israel and Judah to get to each other or to claim fertile land. We also need to recognise that there threads of thinking within the Hebrew Bible that wrestle with each other, in seeking to best understand how to live well with God, with other people, and with the whole creation.

The early followers of Jesus were familiar with the sacred stories and teachings of the Hebrew Bible. Their lives were grounded in practices drawn from the scriptures that have become known to Christians as the Old Testament. Jesus’ teachings were steeped in these stories. When these followers of Jesus reflected on their experiences with him alongside their sacred teachings, they found resonance. That is, they saw similarities between how God had acted in the past and how they encountered God in Christ. They found a continuity of promise. When they read in Isaiah, for example, of someone teaching about God’s judgement and

1 Steven L. McKenzie, 2005, *How to Read the Bible*. Oxford University Press. This is available as an e-book in Camden Theological Library.

justice (Is 42:2), they might have considered Jesus telling stories about sheep and goats (Mt 25). Or, when they read about someone giving their cheek to an enemy and not turning their face away, they might have recalled Jesus telling the crowd to offer their other cheek (Mt 5:39). And when Isaiah describes someone who suffers on behalf of others (Is 53: 3), they might have made connections with the suffering that Jesus experienced. In Luke's Gospel we see the Jesus character inviting this resonance, as he reads from the scroll of Isaiah (61:1–2) in the Synagogue in Nazareth (Lk 4:16–21).

Christ described as 'word-made-flesh' in the Prologue to John's Gospel returns me to contemplate my son's pinky promise. For those who follow-after-Christ, Jesus is understood as an embodiment of words that God has spoken through story after story, instruction after instruction... promise after promise. That doesn't take away the need for us to engage with the complicated and messy



portrayals of promise in the Hebrew Bible. Rather, I think that the process we see in the Hebrew Bible of continual wrestling with God's words as circumstances change, and then the way we see this process at work in the writings of the New Testament which wrestle with how Jesus might resonate with more ancient understandings of God's presence, these are invitations for us to also wrestle with these stories and how they continue to live among us.

Paying attention to the Hebrew Bible *as the Hebrew Bible*, though, can help us to avoid some dangers which lurk in simply lifting up words from another time and place and inserting them into our contemporary context(s). Firstly, I've been using 'we' throughout my reflection. Bu the 'we' I imagine to be reading this edition of Ruminations is a diverse 'we.' Remembering the diversity of situation among our communities and the different ways we are positioned in relation to power, language, and land, for example, can help us to remember that the writers of the Hebrew Bible were also diversely positioned in relation to these things. The Hebrew Bible was composed and edited over around one thousand years.



Plenty changed for the Israelite communities over this time. Not surprisingly, there are intra-biblical debates about how best to understand the character of God and how to live well.

Secondly, attending to what promises in the Hebrew Bible might be written to address can also help us to attend to the places where we read from. That is, when I recall that the promises of the Hebrew Bible are written to people who live on land impacted by powerful empires, including through invasion and destruction of homes, sacred sites, and cities, I have to recognise that my relationship to place is different to that of many writers and editors of the biblical texts. I live on unceded Gadigal and Bidjigal land. This country has its own stories and wisdom, of which I, as a non-Indigenous person, am not the knowledge-holder. The promises in the Hebrew Bible, particularly around the conquest of land and the restoration of land, unsettle me, because of the history of land in the place where I live. They also make me curious about the stories of the land where I live, the ways this wisdom enlivens Gadigal and Bidjigal communities today, and how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christians understand their ancestral stories in conversation with promises of the Hebrew Bible.²

Thirdly, looking for the horizon of promise that is forthtelling rather than foretelling can help us to avoid interpretations that suggest that these texts belong solely to Christians, rather than recognising that the Hebrew Bible is sacred scripture for multiple religious communities. Christian interpretations of Old Testament promise that disregard the socio-political contexts in which they emerged can lead to supersessionism, that is, the suggestion that Christian interpretation has supplanted Jewish interpretation, and the Christian church has replaced the people of Israel as God's people. Supersessionist interpretation is not benign, leading to antisemitism.³ Not-rushing-to-Jesus when interpreting Hebrew Bible promises can help Christians to wrestle with the complex and entangled relationships of diverse communities who hold the biblical texts as sacred scripture. And then, when we contemplate God-with-us as encountered in Christ, we might find a richer, deeper engagement with the ancient stories in which Jesus himself was embedded.

2 'Five Smooth Stones: Reading the Bible through Aboriginal eyes' written by Uncle Graham Paulson and Mark Brett is a helpful place to begin this contemplation. It is held in the Camden Theological Library in the e-book *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*. Edited by R. S. Sugirtharajah. Orbis Books, 2016.

3 You can read an open-access reflection on how to address supersessionism by Jewish scholar of the New Testament, Amy Jill Levine, who was a keynote speaker at PreachFest in 2023. Amy-Jill Levine. "Supersessionism: Admit and Address rather than Debate or Deny." *Religions* 13, no. 2 (2022): 155. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020155>.



Promises Promises

Marilyn Walter | Wagga Pilgrim Uniting Church

When I was growing up, keeping promises was very important in my family. If you promised to do something, or not to do something, you absolutely had to keep your word. And that applied to mum and dad as well as to my brother and me.

It wasn't until I was about 10 years old that I learned that other people didn't see it that way. I was playing with a group of other children, and one of them promised not to hit me, and then he did. Very taken aback, I exclaimed "You promised" and he shrugged his shoulders as if to say "no big deal."

I still remember my sense of disbelief and absolute betrayal. I learned then and there that other people did not see promises as having any special significance. They were words, just words.

When I came into adolescence, I made and broke my own promises: "I promise I'll do my homework tomorrow if I can go out tonight." "I promise I'll phone you tomorrow." And so on. At that time, I thought that promises were more like negotiating strategies rather than ways of sustaining and strengthening my relationships of trust with others. So failing to keep them was "no big deal."

And of course, in adulthood, I too was deeply hurt, no, devastated, when heartfelt and sacred promises from intimates and close friends were broken, and in my turn, I also carelessly hurt and devastated others.

Then came the 1996 Federal elections when politicians in general made promises to undertake all kinds of projects, many in the areas of social justice and dear to my heart. The newly elected Prime Minister then reneged on certain assurances, which he called "non-core" promises which he abandoned in favour of keeping the "core" promises. What really dismayed and angered me was the PM's response to public criticism – that we in the electorate should have known which were core and which weren't before we cast our vote!

I came to recognise that this refusal to take any responsibility by many of our political, social and community leaders has contributed to the lack of trust I see

everywhere – how can we trust each other if our promises, our assurances on the issues that really matter now can be swept aside as if they mean nothing?

What does it do to our relationships of trust with each other – in our families and our community, let alone amongst nations? Our sense of disillusionment and despair has become widespread, and has spread into the church, where plans and projects lapse, and attendance declines. As the singer Peggy Lee asks mournfully, “Is that all there is?”

...other people
did not see
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We might also wonder if God has “core” and “non-core” promises. If you google “God’s promises,” you can see the number of times that God’s faithfulness is attested to by the psalmists, prophets, gospel writers and disciples. Protection, steadfastness, comfort, peace, forgiveness, life eternal... the list goes on. No “non-core” brush-offs in those lists!

There are many instances in the Old Testament when through the prophets, God warns the Israelites to mend their ways, or else tragedy will befall them. Are these “core” or “non-core” promises or warnings? Yet though the people fail to obey or honour the Creator and are conquered, exiled or dispersed, God persists in seeking relationship with them. God makes renewed promises, solemn deeper agreements, restorative covenants, with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David on behalf of his chosen people. Definitely “core” promises!

God has kept his promise to humanity, shared with Jeremiah and Isaiah amongst other prophets, and the Word becomes flesh. The New Covenant provides grace and salvation for all through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Not a “non-core” or “core” promise: as Paul writes, “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ.” (2 Corinthians 1:20 NIV).

The Advent themes of Hope, Peace, Love and Joy remind us of the faithfulness of God’s promises to all humanity. Here lies the hope that we seek in our despair, the peace that we yearn for in such troubled times, the eternal love that welcomes us in our brokenness and the joy which inspires us to sing in gratitude as we remember and celebrate together the coming of the Messiah.

What is it about God’s promises that keeps you believing?



Promise

Stan Tonkins | Barrington Coast

With the help of my father, we bought 'Tirrintippin' on the Bulga Plateau back in 1980. It was my father who taught me to have a love of the land, to have a deep respect and care for the land as you would for others. Something that is so important particularly in this day and age, where we can easily become isolated from others outside of our immediate family. The church is in that space where we can offer hospitality and welcome where we are arms-length from at times, intense family dynamics.

At 'Tirrintippin' we have young people from all over the world as part of their work visas, stay for weeks and occasionally months to be part of regenerative farming. Learning how to care for the land in a unique and at times challenging part of the world, is something to which we are all still adapting. Drought, floods and fires are part of the Australian landscape.

In 2019 a catastrophic fire which destroyed the village of Bobin, attacked my neighbouring village of Elands and my farm. What was a refuge from the shallows of modern life became the centre of a battle wrought by nature, climate change and logging. Families were evacuated to safety and a frontline defence by Bulga Plateau RFS with very few active members but strong community support, was able to provide 24-hour resistance during the month-long fire crisis. More populous centres with better roads and infrastructure received support; we were isolated and remote. My life was overturned, driving the fire truck and fighting fires for over a month on 12-hour shifts. The heat and drama take its toll, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. it is easy to understand why some leave. After the fires our neighbouring devastated villages have risen from the ashes after the horrific firestorm which one helpless witness likened to "the devil himself" storming down the mountain.



During the fires we had two travellers Julia and Christina from Austria who, even though they needed to evacuate they weren't sure where to go because of all the fires that were raging along the east coast. On the farm the fires were so close we could see the mountain outside the kitchen window on fire. They both chose to stay. As I would be away fighting fires, I left the keys in the car so they could escape in the opposite direction of the fire. Either to Walcha or down to Wingham. We had no power for two weeks and I would come back dirty and exhausted after fighting fires for the day. If it was just me at home, I think I would just have fallen into bed and got up 12-hours later and started again. But they had a little candle that I could see as I arrived home at night, and they had a cooked a meal on the gas stove. I was blessed to have them with me during that time.

Along with my visitors from Austria I was sustained by love and my faith. It gives you hope that there is a future. You can see this in those who have love and faith written on their hearts. Not just during the fires but throughout life, where people journey with you sharing in meaningful ways during the ups and downs of life.

The young ones, many digital nomads, ask: "Why did you stay?" My answer is simple – I am bound to this farm, community, the land and my faith; passed down by those who have cared and loved me... this is the treasure I have in my heart.. the promise. In my mind after the grieving and reflection it is the promise in our hearts of a better future that binds a community. That each of us need this treasure and promise written in our heart.

Tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

2 Corinthians 1:21-22
New International Version



In Conversation

Rev. Julie Lawton-Gallard | Southport Uniting Church

Promise, such a big word. I was listening to Alexander Shaia on The Work of the People (theworkofthepeople.com) who said, 'Faithfulness, it's not a word that we can ascribe to ourselves. Only God is faithful, but that we actually can't be faithful.'

We want to be and we try to be, but we can't actually attain faithfulness in its full sense of the word, so I guess for me, in that regard, when God promises, God is faithful to keep those promises for me. That's important stuff and I think that's something we need to hear, because we're not good at keeping promises.

It is because of God's promise, that leads us into faith, into a much deeper relationship, it's not about us, but about God and God's promise.

The story that spring's mind is when I was around twenty years old went to an NCYC (National Christian Youth Convention) in Toowoomba. Tony Campolo was the speaker, and he invited us to go and join him in E.A.P, (Evangelical Association for the Promotion of Education) which was a program for summer holidays in Philadelphia. To work alongside people in the projects (impoverished housing). I was very interested but really needed to discern on whether this was just me wanting to go or is it God wanting me to go.

I struggled a bit with this question and in October I was having this conversation with my Mum and she said that if God wants me to go, I will hear before Christmas. Remember this was in the days of hard copy, snail mail.

Well Christmas was getting nearer and I'd all but forgot about that application, until Christmas Eve. At about 6 o'clock in the evening, there was a knock at the door and this postie just handed me this card and he said 'This must have fallen to the bottom of my basket on my rounds today. I have not been able to relax, I had to come and deliver it to you'. It was just a postcard to say I've been accepted into the program.

Now we just had to get the money together to go, flights back then were so expensive. We were able to get the funds necessary and I jumped on a plane

in Sydney, fully aware that I'm being looked after by God, that was never a question and flew to Philadelphia. As I was getting off the plane I was called over the loudspeaker asking me to make myself known to people who are waiting at one of the gates.

Wow!

So off I go and got into van that was taking me to my accommodation, the driver turned and said, 'So God must really love you, well, we had no idea you were flying in today, so we left the office yesterday and we had no plan going back until Monday. It was only that somebody realised they left something behind that we went back and found your paperwork.' So what if they had not gone back, I would have been a mess with no accommodation and no way of contacting the office over the weekend. I don't think I would have the belief that anyone would find me. Really it is only that God is always watching and always working with you and for you, no matter the circumstances and sometimes it doesn't feel it but God does come through.

God is there, God is looking out and while I was willing to go and explore where God was leading me, God's faithfulness and promise was always with me.

I think as we get older, with more responsibilities, we believe we are the ones who must control the narrative. We see this with the advances in technology, where we seem to rely less on others, on ourselves and on God. It's so easy to get what you need without involving anyone, where Siri is sometimes the only voice you will hear. However, there are those times when we are reminded that God continues to be involved, connected with us and we just need to hook back in with God's faithfulness to us. God's desire to be in relationship with us, God keeping the promise of love.





Fragile Promises

Yvonne Ghavalas | Scattered Community Minister

I picked up a few bad habits growing up in the Church:
like beginning prayers with a "Promise of God" plucked from a long list of
"guarantees,"
a list gifted to me by the best-intentioned Sunday School teachers
and the speech bubbles in my monthly "devotions for teens" series.
Of course, I got very very cross
when my requests of God went unanswered
or, worse, when they were, and I found out
that they were not what I truly wanted or needed

AND
making life-altering decisions upon a few words
that God had said to someone else a very long time ago
as if they were tailored just for me and the dilemmas I was facing –
a calling into ministry, a brave move to a new country, and navigating complex
family relationships.
Of course, I got very very cross
when my requests of God went unanswered
or, worse, when they were, and I found out
that they were not what I truly wanted or needed

AND
riding high on waves of gratitude and testimony to God's faithfulness in my life,
before enduring seasons of silence, where I asked for nothing from God,
where I hardly spoke to God at all.
because, of course, I had gotten very very cross
when my requests of God went unanswered
or, worse, when they were, and I found out
that they were not what I truly wanted or needed

This morning, as I write toward Advent's embrace,
filled with promises of the coming Messiah into our darkest despair,
bringing peace, justice, joy,
and the presence of God-with-us,
I recall Jesus rebuking Peter for resisting the path of a suffering Messiah
as they journeyed toward Jerusalem, toward the cross....

And I'm reminded that, like Peter, I know who Jesus is.
I've pledged my life to His way,
letting the good news of His kingdom shape my days.
Yet, like Peter, I cling to childish hopes of an easy path,
believing suffering can be skirted,
thinking the road to fullness and freedom evades

disappointment,
disaster,
divorce,
dislocation,
discomfort,
(and surely there are more "d" words you can add)
even death.



And I don't really want to talk about the surge of guilt and shame that courses through me
when I think of the promises I've made
– particularly the solemn vows that I've made before God and loved ones –
that I have broken
in spite of good intentions, and desperate attempts to do things differently, and
fervent prayers,
but it's there

As I sit—teary-eyed—in the sunlight,
watching dragonflies flit,
their fragile wings splitting the light into myriad colors,
I'm acutely aware of human frailty,
our limited understanding,
our desperate need for something steadfast,
and the beauty that still shines through our brokenness....

SO

I find myself in this liminal space between past and future,
between what I know and what I hope,
as I walk the path of my story.

I acknowledge the burial mounds of lost promises,
and I pray for deep assurance of forgiveness.

I tread cautiously through desolate places where my life seemed to fall apart,
where my belief in God's goodness and nearness felt absent,
and I offer deep gratitude that I was never truly forsaken by God's great love.



I trace with my finger in the air the words that guide me today, in this life
— the promises that are mine, true through my lived experience:
“the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases ... his mercies are new every morning,”
“the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places,”
“when you pass through the waters, I will be with you When you walk through
fire, you will not be scorched”



And I pray for you, for me, that as we enter this Advent season, it may be with
our eyes wide open to the presence of God with and within us each and every
moment of each and every day.



A word from the Moderator

Rev. Mata Hiliau | Moderator

The promise of a better life

Next month my hometown of Griffith in NSW will host a summit to discuss drug reform. This is an important opportunity for regional voices to have a say on an issue that so uniquely impacts and devastates their families and community.

Griffith, like many regional and rural areas across our state, is in desperate need of support and access to treatment for those in their community suffering with addiction. These people are not alone, they are among 200,000 people in Australia that can't get the treatment they need because there is no room at the inn, or the inn is hundreds of kilometres away. Tragically, your postcode in NSW dictates whether your addiction is a life sentence or not, the problem is particularly acute for Aboriginal people and women with children living in rural areas.



Having been a faith leader in a diverse range of communities, I have witnessed the impact drug dependency on individuals and their families. I understand that this issue does not stand alone. It is complex, multifaceted, and intersects with other problems, such as mental health, homelessness, domestic violence, unemployment and poverty.

What these people need is treatment and the promise of a better life, not punishment and public shaming perpetuated by structures of power divorced from justice and compassion.

We must pray for those with wounded and broken lives, and meet them where they are at, not condemn them to prison cells and punitive measures that fail to fix the problem and often exacerbate it.

Jesus began his public ministry with a call to (Mark 1:15) “turn from injustice and alienation and turn toward life”. Further, our Lord calls us “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God”.

To “do justice” means recognising the systems and laws of inequality and oppression that persist in our world and standing with those who are most affected.

We have always said this is a health and social issue and not a criminal one and our faith in Christ reminds us of the inherent value of all people.

We all want to live in a world where everyone is treated with dignity and respect, including people who use drugs.

Mata



Getting in to the conversation

Rev. Steve Everist | Gerringong Uniting Church

I've been to a lot of weddings over the years and from time to time I get placed at the difficult relatives table presumably because ministers are thought to have special powers in dealing with the rude uncle Albert's of this world (we don't). After a few hours of conversation with rude Uncle Albert, who was sitting on my left and Aunty Edith the Genghis Kahn of hardened atheists who was sitting on my right (names have been changed to protect the innocent), I was beginning to wonder about my career choices when I discovered something quite liberating. There were nine other tables at this wedding and as soon as the dessert was finished, I was free to leave the difficult relatives table and discover that most of the people at the wedding were pretty open to having a chat about almost anything.

Jesus has a name for the other people at the wedding, they are the "*people of peace*" (Matthew 10:11; Luke 10:6), the kind of people Jesus told his followers to make relationships with because they would be open to the gospel. The good news is that in sharing our faith we are not doomed to fruitless conversations with people at the difficult relative's table. In fact Jesus quite clearly instructed his followers not to persist with conversations that are clearly going no-where but to wipe the dust off our feet and move on to another table. (Matthew 10:14 and check out Matthew 7:6).

It is helpful to know that in life the percentage of people who are closed to all opinions but their own are about the same as the difficult relatives table at a wedding, about 10%. Most people are "people of peace" and if you approach them in the right way, they are happy to chat about deep things of meaning and purpose and in fact are keen to have those



conversations because they, like you, are still trying to figure out how to have more meaning and purpose in their lives and are happy to hear your take on things. That being said I want to suggest a few guidelines that I find helpful.

Trust in the Holy Spirit (John 15:26-27)

Jesus is very clear that we are both to trust in the Holy Spirit and at the same time to testify about Jesus, or in the words of Peter, to be *prepared to give an account in the hope that is in us* (1 Peter 3:15). To trust in the Holy Spirit is to know that God's Spirit is about the business of connecting and directing people to the presence and purposes of God and that God is already at work in many of the people we will meet. This means that it is not solely up to us to introduce people to God because God's Spirit shares in that process with us. This realisation should stop us feeling totally responsible and burdened about sharing our faith and point us in the direction of the God connections that already exist in people's lives.

Let your manner be in sync with your message (1 Peter 3:15)

"A gentle answer turns away wrath" (Proverbs 15:1). Firstly, while some people are angry about church, sometimes for good reasons, a gentle Christ-like demeanour is more often than not disarming and will allow you to move past peoples hurt. Secondly, to treat people with respect is to accept people without judgement which is both a command of Jesus (Matthew 7:1-5), an instruction of Paul (Romans 2:1-3) and good relationship wisdom because respect opens the door to relationship while disrespect swiftly closes it.

Listen (James 1:19)

Listening attentively is respect in practice. Now, while you would think listening is fairly simple there are good and bad ways of listening. Fake listening, where we simply wait for someone to say their piece so we can tell them what we want to say, is relatively easy to spot. Instead, be an active listener, feedback what you have heard to your conversation partner, *"so what you believe is such and such?"* In the same way listening with an agenda is also relatively easy to spot. This is when people see that you are only in the conversation to achieve some outcome of your own, instead ask God's Holy Spirit to help you genuinely care for this person and respect what they believe. I find this simple attitude shift really helps in building relationships of depth.



Promises are commitments

Nathan Tyson | Director, First Peoples Strategy and Engagement

Promises are powerful commitments. Or at least they should be. Promises commit the maker to an undertaking. They should be made in good faith, and with a genuine intention to carry them out.

Unfortunately, the people we should most expect to live up to their promises usually don't. I'm talking about politicians.

Once upon a time in this country, leaders of nations were chosen based on their track record of accomplishments, knowledge, wisdom, and commitment to the wellbeing of their community. Today, sadly, we seem to be expected to elect people based on who can tell the biggest lies and run the best smear/ fear campaigns.

How often do we hear pre-election promises that are never fulfilled by the party who is elected? Politicians know they can make any promise they want, and then backtrack later using "the budget" or "things that weren't disclosed by the former government" as the excuse.

Politicians of course use the old save-all phrase of: "Well if you don't like it, you can exercise your opinion at the next election". Which is great, except that prior to the next election the same party makes all new amazing promises to fix a bunch of things, and cons voters into voting for them all over again.

Why is it that we have such a low threshold of expected integrity for our elected officials? Why do we not require our politicians, and electoral candidates, to speak the truth? Why are politicians and candidates for election not legally required to have a reasonable and genuine belief in the content of their political statements?

If I turn up for work and tell a bunch of lies, I'll lose my job. Some politicians intentionally spread misinformation regularly without any real sanction, and they get paid a lot more than I do. Surely for \$200,000+ per year our politicians should be expected to have some professional integrity?

The Voice Referendum showed the damage that lies and misinformation, spread by politicians for political point-scoring, can have on our democratic process.

The “If you don’t know, vote no” mantra spruiked by the Opposition Leader really summed up Dutton’s strategy – spread as much misinformation as possible to create fear in the voting public. It worked and millions of people voted “No” without bothering to find out what they were actually voting “No” to.

The keenness with which some people accepted their own ignorance without question, is another issue that I think warrants some research. Although I suspect the conclusion would be that people with significant pre-existing bias (for example views underpinned by racism and/or bigotry) don’t look too hard for reasons to challenge their existing beliefs. Such people don’t like to be wrong, and like even less to admit they are wrong, so they stubbornly cling to outdated ideology and related views.

While I believe that, for many Australians, Dutton’s fear campaign gave them the excuse they wanted to vote “No”, Dutton’s behaviour was a clear shot across the bow for our democracy. Unless we do something to legally require politicians to have “reasonable grounds” or “a reasonable basis for belief”, or similar, for their political statements, all future elections will be led by media campaigns that bombard the public with misinformation and lies. The purpose of bombarding the public with a myriad of lies and misinformation is so that nobody knows what is true, and consequently voters feel that no information can be trusted – even information from those who are telling the truth!

For politicians who lack credentials and or integrity, this is an effective strategy: They don’t need to prove they are worthy, they only need to get enough people to think the other candidate is unworthy.

We see this happen a lot in the US, where Trump tells so many lies that the average voter can’t possibly fact check them all, with the result it places all information in the political sphere under a cloud of distrust. Who knows what is right, or who is right? Of course, the pre-decided Trump voters just believe anything Trump says without question.

I think the “if you don’t know, vote No” campaign similarly appealed to pre-determined Referendum voters. They didn’t really care what the words were, it was just the excuse that many people were looking for to explain why they voted the way they always intended to.

My question is: How can the electorate be fully and properly informed about the issues we are voting on, if there is so much misinformation being published that nobody can tell what is real and what isn’t?

My experience suggests that misinformation strategies are usually adopted by those who have no substantive policies, and/or no personal integrity, and who are more interested in wealth and power, than reputation. It is the realm of Trump, Dutton, and others: distract, distort and derail. Win by not losing.

We all know Trump has a very loose relationship with the truth. In fact, I think Trump divorced truth some time ago, treating Americans as gullible pawns in his ambitions for power.

Dutton, in my opinion, has a similar lack of respect for the Australian public – using Trump-like rhetoric to fuel racism and division for the sole purpose of political gain. He plays populist politics and is the master of the dog-whistle. I don't believe Dutton is interested in a better Australia for all. I believe his priority is his political career, and that his conduct during the Voice Referendum shows that he's willing to throw the nation under a bus to become Prime Minister, (by this I am referring to things like: Our democracy is now driven and negatively impacted by misinformation; "Reconciliation" may not be dead, but it is certainly on life-support; racism, racial vilification and hate speech has increased noticeably since the "No" outcome, not only towards Aboriginal people, but across the board; and the ongoing failure to address issues of entrenched socio-economic disadvantage mean that the billions of dollars spent each year to ineffectively address such disadvantage will likely continue.)

Our current Prime Minister is not faring well either. Following his election, Albanese stated in his victory speech that he was "committed to implementing the Uluru Statement from the Heart in full". Yet after the failure of the Voice Referendum he has gone almost silent about the Treaty and Truth elements of the Statement, seemingly backtracking on plans for a bricks and mortar Makarrata Commission. It seems Albanese is now also putting his political aspirations and career ahead of what he had previously committed to. Another broken political promise.

The question people need to ask, is why do politicians withdraw support for positive initiatives designed to address the entrenched disadvantage impacting Aboriginal peoples and communities?

The answer is that career politicians know that the inherent level of racism and bigotry towards Aboriginal people in this country means that pushing initiatives that white people will label as "Abos getting special treatment" (along with demands that "we are all the same and should all be treated the same", etc), is generally not the pathway to election or re-election. I think Albanese was lucky that most Australians saw the Statement from the Heart as a motherhood statement and didn't think it through too much and Albanese's election was, I think, more likely linked to a rejection of the former LNP Government than a vote for the Statement from the Heart.



So how do we instil more integrity in our political process? How can we protect the integrity of our democracy and enforce an expectation that our politicians will not lie to us?

I believe Australia needs legislation that holds politicians accountable for electoral promises and similar statements of commitment, other than in exceptional circumstances and if they are found to have lied to the Australian public, either knowingly, or without having undertaken reasonable due diligence to check their facts, then the penalties should be significant, include a judicial option for incarceration for serious offences.

The average Australian can end up in gaol for being broke and having unpaid parking fines, 12-year-olds can end up locked up for stealing food because they are hungry, and the Northern Territory wants to lock up 10 year olds for such offences. Yet politicians, those in charge of running the country, can knowingly make grandiose political promises they know they won't keep, for the purpose of deceiving voters, without any legal consequence. How is that situation fair or reasonable? This country can only have an effective democracy if we are provided with accurate information about the issues affecting this country and the policy positions of those we might elect to deal with such issues.

I think Australians deserve better from our elected representatives, and those seeking election, than misinformation and lies. I believe this country needs legislation to stop politicians and political parties from knowingly spreading misinformation and lies.

The potential irony, of course, is that if a political leader promised to implement such legislation, I'd probably vote for them. But if they then didn't implement the legislation there would be nothing I could actually do about the broken promise. This leads to another practical question: Would our politicians pass legislation that held them accountable for their political promises and stated commitments? A discussion for another day.

I hope this article may have got you thinking. It is of course just my opinion, written from my perspective, based on my lived experience. Whether you agree with what I write or not, I hope you can at least agree that our democracy is too important to be derailed and/or frustrated as a result of political misinformation campaigns and "porky pies" told by politicians. I hope you may also agree that we need some form of legislation to hold politicians more accountable for the promises they make.

*This country
can only have
an effective
democracy if we
are provided
with accurate
information...*

Saltbush Relational Resources

Saltbush Cafés

In regular series of three or four nights the Saltbush team hold online cafés centred around diverse themes or readings. Saltbush cafés are easy to attend, relaxed and an encouraging way to meet other and explore life and faith together.

Scattered Community Gatherings

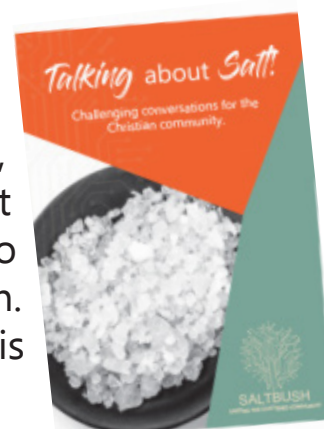
Three to four times a year in different rural or coastal location the Saltbush team hold Scattered Community Gatherings. You can also attend these online from wherever you are to wherever we are. These gatherings are centred around worship, encouragement, education and the practice of discipleship.

Word around the Bush

Each week of the year the Saltbush team present a visual message based on the lectionary reading for that week. You are free to watch and use in your own congregation this message. You can also print off the Saltbush liturgy that is provided each week to accompany the visual message.

Talking about Salt

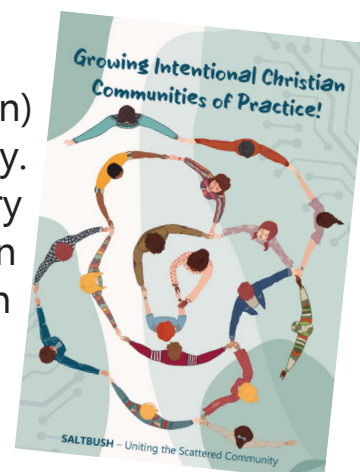
This is our publication available for any congregation or group who are willing to have some discussion around who you are, how you gather and how you live out your faith. Talking about Salt is five difficult conversations for congregations and can also be used to shape a life and witness discussion and consultation. Talking about Salt is available free to any congregation and is available both online and in post.



Intentional Christian Communities

This is our publication available for any congregation or group who are willing to think about the challenge of being intentional in how we gather as the Christian community.

Dive into any part of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke & John) and you will find Jesus intentionally going about his ministry. At times it looks like chaos and no doubt it was, but at every step Jesus acts with intention. Growing Intentional Christian Communities of Practice is available free to any congregation and is available both online and in post.



The Great Unravelling

The Saltbush team have prepared six conversations as part of our reading of the book:

Joining God in the Great Unravelling by Alan J. Roxburgh.

However, these conversations are not a study guide to the book, but an invitation to open ourselves to deeply consider who and how we, the church, our christian communities, are participating in the ways of God beyond ourselves.



Digital packages for congregations

If your congregation would like a Saltbush digital package so that you can use and connect with us and the wider church please simply get in touch. A digital package includes: smart tv, mobile stand for the tv, all connectors and cables, TV, camera and our support to set it all up.

Visits

The Saltbush team are always willing to visit your congregation or group to meet you, talk with you about how it is for you as a congregation or Christian community and how you seek to be part of the missional relationship with others. Simply get in touch and one of the Saltbush team will come to visit you.

Look on our website under **Word, Ruminations, Talking about Salt** or **Contact Us**.

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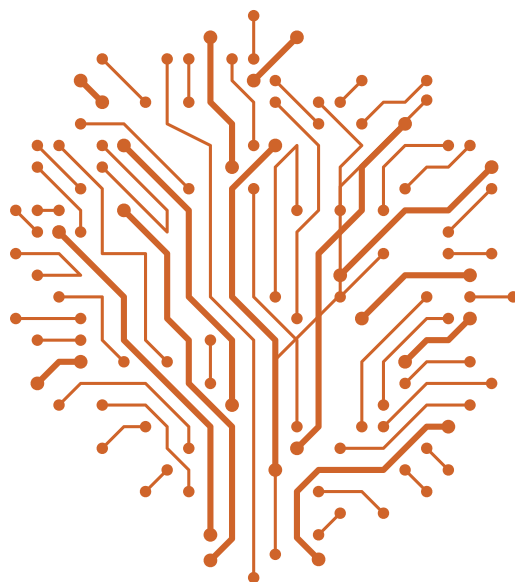
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