

Promises and promising

By [Wes D. Avram](#)

December 14, 2014

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

This week's 2 Samuel and Luke passages get me thinking about *promising*.

Not coerced promises. A promise to obey traffic laws in order to get a license is *benignly* coerced. A promise to be quiet under threat of harm is *violently* coerced. They're not what I'm thinking about.

Set retaliatory or manipulative promises aside, too. A promise to make an enemy "pay" has the shape of promise, but it's also not what I'm thinking about.

I'm thinking about free, positive promising. To promise to not forget someone's birthday next year. To promise lifelong commitment, no matter what, to a child. To promise fidelity in marriage, or baptism, or vocation. We think of this kind of "promising" as a deeper than simply agreeing.

Why?

To promise is to make regard for the other a part of your self. It's to let others make a claim, to restrict our freedom, to limit how we imagine our future. The self is the collateral of a free promise. If I do not do what I promise you I will do, I will be less myself. Breaking an agreement requires understanding. Breaking a promise requires forgiveness.

Also, a promise suggests sacrifice. It says we're willing to shed some of our own freedom, interests, or desires for the sake of the individual or community to whom we promise. It's making space in our sense of the world, and time in our sense of the future. It's the definition of *grace*.

And to promise says we want our lives to be coherent, that our memory, action, and imagination will be related in a way that can make sense to others. We want our lives to mirror, in some way, a story beyond our own instincts. We promise "by virtue" of our faith that life makes sense. We make commitments, put our selves at stake, and sacrifice our immediate needs for the sake of relationship.

So Nathan says God has a *promise* for David, and through David for God's people. So the Angel Gabriel makes a *promise* from God to Mary, which is a promise not only about what God is doing inside Mary but also that the promise to David will be fulfilled, will make sense, through this one who is promised to grow within her.

To learn of God, we can look on the thing promised—as well as on the promising itself.