

Isaiah 64:1-4  
1 Corinthians 2:1-13

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## PROGRESSIVE TRUST

For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within. So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. *1 Corinthians 2:11-12*

Trust can be especially difficult in hard times because a part of our confidence has been violated. Yet it is not so hard or bold a step to trust more in God in hard times than in easier times. First, because God asks us to trust, and who better to trust than God. The best active principle in facing hard times is to accept the outstretched hand that is always extended. Two months after Reinhold Niebuhr's father died, while he was filling his father's vacant pulpit at age 21, Niebuhr told this story.

As a child I once spent a day with my grandmother. Towards evening a severe storm began. "Now, how will you get home, child?" the old woman asked. But then my father came to fetch me. He had a big blue coat, as men wore at that time, and as we left he said, "Come under here." I slipped under the coat, grabbed his hand, and off we went. I couldn't see anything as we splashed through puddles and mire. I heard the rain and the thunderclaps and seized my father's hand and held it tightly. But I would have been a fool if I had complained that it was dark around me. After all, it was my father's coat, protecting me from the weather, that made it dark. Father saw the path, I knew that... and when the coat parted, we were at home. I looked at my mother's cheerful face and at our bright, warm room, and everything was as pleasant and cozy as only home can be. Of course, father had brought me home. Where else should he have brought me. So it is with our heavenly Father. If only we trust him, he holds our hand, takes us under his wings, and leads us through storm and tempest.

Trust is at the heart of life because it's at the heart of mystery. It is especially at the heart of faith because we claim a special intimacy with one who is not seen. To the Romans, Paul wrote, "For in this hope we are saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for whoever hopes for what can be seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (Romans 8:23-24).

We do not understand the quantum tunneling that would, if we could fathom it, explain how a message gets across a synapse in its transmission to the brain. We do not know with surety how the cells in the body know precisely how to build a nose with specific and unique proportions, and which cell goes where and how it does that. We do not know what energy is (we can only describe what it does), or how come my dog knows I'm walking up the driveway when she can't see me, or how love works, or what personality is, or why someone gets put on our mind precisely at the right moment, as we discover afterward, or how God can listen to us and work with us all at once, and whoever else might be out there in the cosmos. But we don't implode with anxiety because of these things. If we disconnected ourselves from everything we don't understand, we'd all have to climb back in a cave and block the entrance up.

We trust, and we build trust by degrees, gaining confidence until we take things for granted. When Carolyn finished college I finally broke down and bought a new car after ten years. I didn't really want to put money in a new car, but sometimes we have to answer to a higher authority. Well, a car is a car, right? We bought the car on a Tuesday, my day off. And of course, as soon as Jane and I got home I suddenly created a list of all the errands I had to do—just so I could drive around and play with all the buttons and gadgets and feel like a king. I was gone for three days. One day that first week I pulled into the driveway, turned off the engine and just sat there, still basking in the thrill of it and breathing deeply of that new car smell. Eventually, out loud, I said to myself, "O.K., Victor, I'm sorry, but you have to get out of the car and go into the house." I'd catch myself

sneaking over to the window in the den, pulling the curtain back an inch just to make sure it was still there. I'd park it three blocks away if I went to the mall so that it was shielded by a vast expanse of secure emptiness. I don't do that anymore. I trust a lot more now. Does this all sound familiar.

Trusting builds trust.

Trust may be blind but it need not be foolish. There is a cooperative element in trusting God insofar as God expects us to do our part. Oliver Cromwell put it with characteristic bluntness when he advised his troops: "Trust in God and keep your powder dry."

Oh, I understand that sometimes trust backfires. Sometimes we set the bar too high and trust too much. Sometimes we trust unwisely against the better counsel of experience or conscience or the advice of others. And sometimes we ask more of God than is wise or right for us, such as asking God to fix someone or something, when God, to the contrary,

wants us to let the thing go. Such things can lead to disappointments, a damaged faith, or worse. You've no doubt seen the articles in recent years that confirm what most of us know at heart, that faith in God contributes substantially to a much higher incidence of wellness and well-being, and the ability to come through otherwise devastating illness. The science based studies in this regard are almost legion. Recently, a Duke University Medical School study looked at what happens to people when religious trust, when faith goes sour in the face of illness. I quote from *Research News. . . in Science and Theology*:

Mortality during a two year study [of 595 participants 55 or older] was higher among participants who reported feeling abandoned or punished by God, those who questioned God's love for them, those who felt abandoned by their church, those who believed the devil was at work in their illness, and those who questioned the power of God. . . . [The study] shows how negative religious beliefs can have harmful effects in the exactly opposite way that positive beliefs may work.

Trust is a progressive thing. The only way we learn to trust God, or anyone, is by trusting.

In the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century a group of Carmelite nuns, led by Theresa of Avila, were traveling on foot to a neighboring convent in a frightening storm. Crossing a dangerously rickety bridge over a swollen stream, St. Theresa prayed earnestly that the bridge would hold up until they were safely across. It didn't. Near the center it collapsed, spilling all the nuns into the water. They managed to struggle to the shore, and Theresa raised her eyes to heaven and said, "Lord, if this is the way you treat your friends, it's little wonder that you have so many enemies." Known for her wit and good humor, Theresa knew that trusting in God was not a matter of protection from earth or nature's calamities, but a sustaining power to cope with them.

Remember to embrace the promise, and trust. For whether we live or die we are the Lord's, and nothing upon earth or beyond can separate us from the power and assurance of that promise, if we hold it in trust.

Amen.