

The Audacity of Hope in Christ
2 Samuel 11:1-15 & Ephesians 3:14-21

There's a luminous painting of a sitting young nude woman in the *Dutch Masters* collection of the NY Metropolitan Museum of Art http://www.metmuseum.org/works_of_art/collection_database/european_paintings/the_toilet_of_bathsheba_rembrandt_rembrandt_van_rijn/objectview.aspx?collID=11&OID=110001843 Voluptuously aglow at the center of the painting, all the light is focused on her with the rest of the painting in shadow. I looked at her and stepped in closer. The woman was being attended, an elderly woman at her feet giving her a pedicure and a nondescript woman behind braiding her hair. I stepped in to get a closer look – Aah, a Rembrandt. And what's the title? *The Toilet of Bathsheba*. *Oh my gosh, that's Bathsheba as King David saw her; but where's King David?* Now, not just looking at the luminous nude woman but looking at the painting way up on a distant spire I could see King David looking down. And there in the right-hand corner in the shadows is a peacock. It was at that point I realized that I had been set-up! Rembrandt drew me into the picture just as David was drawn in by voyeuristically spying on Bathsheba. It was almost irresistible. The great painter painted not just Bathsheba at her bath, but also a moral lesson of the viewer caught in the same web as King David so many years before. The peacock, representing human vanity seals the moral lesson.

Not much has changed since the time of King David with politicians getting in trouble with adultery. North Carolina Governor Mark Sanford and Nevada Senator John Ensign – both with now greatly diminished presidential aspirations – have been the most recent politicians to get caught in the same sin as David. Sanford and Ensign are Republicans. But not to be outdone we can easily match them up on the Democratic side with former NY State Governor Eliot Spitzer and former NC Senator and Presidential hopeful Jonathan Edwards. There's no shortage of politicians who have abused their position of power having affairs and thinking everything was fine as long as they didn't get caught.

But as Rembrandt's painting showed us; it's not just about King David. We each get drawn into that painting as a voyeur. Do you not read the headlines about celebrity scandals and affairs as wait in the grocery check-out line to buy your groceries? The cheap and tawdry draws us. Whether in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, or at the supermarket check-out line, in countless hours of reality shows on TV, on the internet, or in the myriad of choices we have each day to do the right thing or to do something less than the right thing. Each of us faces temptations and each of us has fallen to them. Today's Psalmist put it bluntly.

All are corrupt and commit abominable acts; there is not one who does any good. The Lord looks down from heaven upon us all, to see if there is any who is wise, if there is one who seeks after God. Every one has proved faithless; all alike have turned bad; there is none who does good; no, not one.

The Apostle Paul picks up where the Psalmist left off in Romans 3:23, “*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” Heck, if we’re honest we don’t just fall short, each and every one of us is stuck in the garbage dump miles away from the glory of God! Our moral failures are not a pretty picture. And each of us has them.

Today we read two scripture passages that are new to the Episcopal lectionary. They represent some of the new riches brought to us through the new *Revised Common Lectionary*. And also these two scripture passages bring us a surprising contrast. This is the first time the story of King David spying out and then committing adultery with Bathsheba, and far worse arranging for her husband’s death in battle, has been read in our Sunday worship. It is also the first time we have heard what I think of as one of the most beautiful prayers in all of Scripture – Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians in 3:14-21.

What a contrast! The story of David and Bathsheba is a sad account of temptation and moral failure, a moral failure that touches us all. Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians is full of the audacity to hope that the love of God might penetrate their hearts and lives to such a degree that the sinfulness and tawdriness of life would be completely overturned for them. Paul prays for nothing less than that in every corner of their being they know, they live, they share, and they are filled with the love of God. It is an audacious prayer. The one is a sad and tawdry tale that is repeated again and again representing our weakness. The other is a luminous prayer that has the audacity to hope the Ephesians – and you and me – can change, can truly be transformed, filled and renewed in the love and power of God.

Let’s look at Paul’s prayer. Paul starts out, “*for this reason...*” What reason? Obviously Paul is alluding to what he has just written. Up to this point he has been explaining his mission, the work God had given him to do to preach good news to Gentiles as well as Jews. This is what Paul believed, the ministry to which he had been called, Gospel he had proclaimed among them, and the work he was continuing despite great obstacles on their behalf. “*For this reason,* he continues, “*I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and earth takes its name. (And I pray for you.)*”

Paul prays for them and I think he prays for us. Paul prays for everything he knows they needed but were afraid to ask.

- He prays that they be strengthened.
- He prays that Christ might dwell in their hearts.
- He prays that they will be rooted and grounded in love.
- And he prays that they might have an amazing experience of Christ’s love, which is beyond all knowing.
- And he prays that they will be filled with the fullness of God.

Note what he doesn’t pray for. He doesn’t pray that there problems go away. He doesn’t pray that they start being *good* from now on. He doesn’t pray that they

attend church more frequently or give more money or do more good deeds or pray more or study more. There isn't a single *should* or *ought to* in Paul's prayer. He simply prays that they – both individually and communally – be caught up in God's incredible love and that God's incredible love be caught up in them. Paul has the audacity to believe that this is possible and he has the audacity to believe that as God answers this prayer that it will make all the difference.

This is a powerful prayer. We often hear new nuances in meaning when we hear the same passage in a different translation. Listen to the hard-hitting words of Eugene Peterson in *The Message*:

14-19 My response is to get down on my knees before the Father, this magnificent Father who parcels out all heaven and earth. I ask him to strengthen you by his Spirit—not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength—that Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite him in. And I ask him that with both feet planted firmly on love, you'll be able to take in with all followers of Jesus the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God.

20-21 God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us.

*Glory to God in the church!
Glory to God in the Messiah, in Jesus!
Glory down all the generations!
Glory through all millennia! Oh, yes!*

One of the things I love about Paul's prayer is that three dimensions aren't enough for him as he starts to talk about God's love so he adds a fourth dimension. In the NRSV: *I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of God that surpasses knowledge...* You have length, height, width... and then what? Three dimensions don't seem to be adequate for Paul to write about the experience. There's another whole spiritual dimension to the experience of the fullness of God's love.

Of course the thing isn't possible. The love of God surpasses all human knowledge. How could we imperfect humans possibly experience the fullness of God anyway? The Psalmist and Paul himself point out that all of us fall short – far short – of God's glory. The failings we gawk at in King David and politicians and celebrities are familiar to us because on a less dramatic scale they are our own temptations and failings. How can Paul be so audacious as to pray that we have this amazing transformative encounter with the living God? Paul can pray for it because for one he knows it – he has experienced this great love himself. And for

two Paul knows that God's grace isn't dependent on us, but on a power from beyond us. And so he concludes his prayer: *"Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."*

Do we dare to believe in the power of God to touch and heal and fill and empower and transform us? Can we risk trusting so deeply in God's love? Can we let go of ourselves to let God enter in and work within us on that kind of scale? Do we have the audacity with St. Paul to ask God to fill us, to dwell in us, to empower us, to let us know his love so deeply and fully? If you want to risk it I invite you to pray with me Paul's prayer of Ephesians 3:14-21. Just substitute "we" and "our" instead of "I" "you" and "your." Let us pray:

For this reason we bow our knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. We pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that we may be strengthened in our inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith, as we are being rooted and grounded in love. We pray that we may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that we may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.