

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
Sunday, June 14, 2020

“Sarah Laughed”

The Back Pew - Jeff Larson

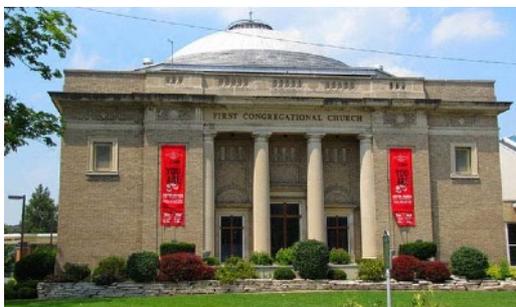


After the 3 men ate they tell Abraham in 1 year Sarah will have a baby. Since Abe & Sarah were very old and these men were not doctors.. **SARAH LAUGHED! Ge 18:12** but hardly anyone noticed.

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

Hebrew Scripture: Genesis 18:1-15

One of the funniest experiences I can remember came from a conversation I had with a sweet old couple who were members of the First Congregational Church in Battle Creek, Michigan.



The husband and wife were well into their 90s and at a party celebrating their seventy-fifth wedding anniversary. The wife was the more talkative of the two

and she began to list their many health concerns. ‘This’ wasn’t working so well and ‘that’ wasn’t working so well. Then the woman paused, and in a moment of shocking transparency, sadly lamented that after producing five children over so many years all her husband was left with was ... a garden hose. The poor man sheepishly stared at his shoes for the longest time.



Every time I read this story about Sarah and Abraham, I remember this dear couple from Battle Creek. I remember them because after Sarah was told by three strangers that she would have a child, in her 90s, she laughed *to herself* (Note! Not out-loud.) and she *thought* (Note! Not out-loud) “I am old and worn out, and my Lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?” In this one sentence we have much biblical irreverence. First, Sarah’s reference to being ‘worn-out’ is a euphemism for being post-menopausal. Her husband being ‘old’ is a reference to his, well, ‘garden hose’. And her question, ‘will I now have this pleasure?’, is playfully ambiguous. We do not know if she is referring to the pleasure of bearing the child or the pleasure of conceiving the child – either

way, the writer raises our eyebrows and encourages even the most prudish among us to smirk just a bit.



Yet, let us focus on something far more meaningful and that is that Sarah laughed. Sarah laughed *to herself* and *thought...*<sup>1</sup> The key here is that Sarah laughed a specific kind of laugh. It is a laugh that reeked of cynicism. It is a laugh that said she has borne so much hurt that the mere suggestion of anything positive still happening is actually laughable, that is, ridiculous. Within Sarah's laugh was buried anger. Sarah's laugh was pregnant with contempt, perhaps even contempt for God. Sarah's laugh was one of seething resentment. That's why it wasn't out-loud, that is why she only 'thought' her caustic retort.



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<sup>1</sup> Note that Abraham also laughed. After God makes a promise to Abraham that Sarah will conceive, he “fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, ‘Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?’” (Genesis 17:17).

You see God promised Abraham and Sarah many decades ago that she would give birth. And nothing happened. And nothing happened. And nothing happened. Then Sarah was forced to ask her maid servant, Hagar, to lay with Abraham to have their child. Abraham was willing. This had to be a humiliation too horrible to bear. And Sarah in time could not. Sarah and Hagar's relationship became poisoned. Hagar had little compassion for Sarah. Sarah treated Hagar with "shocking cruelty" and banished both her and her son, Ishmael.<sup>2</sup> Yes, Sarah laughed. But nothing was funny. Her laugh contained invective. Sarah's decades of disillusionment and cynicism made her laugh.

In this day and age, there is much to be cynical about. Nation. Church. And even self.



One can understandably say, racism has always been with us, it will always be us. Police reforms? Yeah, we've been there, done that, over and over again. Voter suppression? It has been happening since at least era of Reconstruction. Politicians will always be politicians. The rich will always be

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<sup>2</sup> Gale Yee, "Sarah", in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Volume 5), ed. David Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 982.

parasitic towards the poor. We have reason to laugh when our constitution claims to form “a more perfect union”.



Over the past several years, our church has undergone many trials and tribulations. We had a high ministerial turnover. We had some wounding arguments and broken relationships in our church. We have had long-range plans before. We have few young people worshipping with us. Our roof needs repair and replacement. We live in the most secular state in the union. Our membership is tired. Our congregation is frail. After being born in 1816, we can even say like Sarah that we are ‘old and worn out’. We have good reason to laugh when I tell you that I believe with every fibre of my body that this church is called to great relevance in this community and will one day thrive again.



We are all aware, even frightened, by the frailty of our bodies. One need not be in one's 90s to be concerned about all manner of ailments (although our own dear Bob Keller, who is about to turn ninety this week, looks as 'fit as a fiddle'). "Cancer, AIDS, diabetes, infertility, anorexia, multiple sclerosis, kidney failure, mental illness, paralysis, heart disease, depression, miscarriage, and host of other bodily troubles [including COVID-19] wage war against all kinds of people".<sup>3</sup> Not one of will escape this Earth without at least one organ failing us. We have good reason to laugh when we hear the Apostle Paul question "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit? [...] therefore honor God with your bodies" (I Corinthians 6:20).



Yes, Sarah laughed. But the laugh she hid within herself, the laugh for which she was ashamed, the laugh that was filled with cynicism, the laugh that she denied was altered, changed, morphed, converted, and transformed! For when Isaac was born, Sarah laughed again. But this time, rather than denying her laughter, Sarah boasted "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me" (Genesis 21:6).

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<sup>3</sup> Carolynne Hitter Brown, "Proper 6", in *Preaching God's Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary, Year A*, eds. Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, Ronald Allen, and Dale Andrews (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2013), p. 279.

## PAUL NICKERSON'S CHURCH VITALITY COACHING



This Tuesday evening, our Council will contemplate how it is that we will approach the future ministry of our beloved church. We will decide how it is that we will invest in our long-term future. While we may silently and perhaps even cynically laugh at the prospect of our church becoming revitalized, renewed, and relevant to this community and world, I am certain that God will turn our cynicism into joy and our doubt to celebration. We will, like Sarah, no longer laugh at God but rather laugh with God.

This is the Word of God, and it was delivered to (you at home) the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".