



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

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"Aging: The Irony of it All"

A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Bill J. Leonard at Myers Park Baptist Church

On August 4, 2024, from Genesis 18:1-14 and Luke 10:38-42

"Push, Sarah," the midwife said. Sarah pushed, and in an instant the child entered the world. Sarah heard the baby's first cry, and her weary old body shook with laughter.

That's the irony of it all, whatever our age may be. Life takes off in an unexpected direction, so unpredictable, so ironic, you just have to laugh. Sarah, the sad, "barren" woman, becomes the "mother of a nation," today we say a "sage," at a moment in life when it seemed impossible. Remember? In the morning of their days, God promised Sarah and Abraham that their descendants would be as numerous as the sands of the seashore. On one occasion God even "took Abram outside," the Bible says, and told him: "Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. So many, shall your descendants be." (Gen. 15:5) But, mathematically speaking, before you can have multitudes, you must first have one, and at that Sarah and Abraham were not so lucky. Time passed, and, as Genesis 16:1 says, "Abram's wife Sarai had borne him no children." It looked as if Sarah's biological clock had stopped. She was barren, her neighbors said. The mother of a multitude was barren.

What a terrible word, barren, when applied to a human being. But we use it too, don't we--label all kinds of folks as "barren" in our world, implicitly if not explicitly? People with disabilities, the infertile, the people on food stamps or the teenagers in hoodies, the poor, the unemployed, the aged. It is one of those categories we use for cutting people off, keeping them at arm's length, sometimes even beating them up in the name of God. Like when 21st century politicians use Paul's words, "those who don't work, don't eat," (2 Thess. 3:10) to validate public policy the way 19th century politicians used Paul's words, "slaves be subject to your masters," (Eph. 6:5) to validate chattel enslavement. These days some folks don't say "barren," they say, "cat ladies."

Maybe Sarah discovered what you and I should know. In God's eyes nobody is barren; all persons have value to be claimed and worth to be celebrated. Perhaps Sarah learned that baby or no baby, God had been with her all along. Ironic, isn't it? It seemed **inconceivable** (I'll wait) that she should have a child after years of trying, and crying; after the ordeal with Hagar, surrogate mother, and assertive slave-woman. In the end, aging seemed to have settled the matter, anyway.

But one day, when Abraham and Sarah are dwelling at a place called Mamre, three strangers show up in camp. Abraham extends desert hospitality, offering food and conversation, in the course of which one guest remarks that within a year, "you and Sarah your wife will have a son."



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And Sarah, listening through the tent flap, hears the prediction and laughs her head off. The biblical text fairly giggles as Sarah says: "I am past bearing children now that I am out of my time, and my husband is **old**." Earthy book, the Bible—Sarah and the rest of us with ears to hear and pills to take to take know exactly what she is snickering about. As the text explains it, the stranger is actually "the Lord," today we might say a "sage" in disguise, and he takes offense at Sarah's laughter. And the story turns into a kind of a comic interchange in which the stranger asks, "Why did Sarah laugh?" and gives a one sentence sermon: "Is anything impossible with God?" Sarah panics and lies to the Lord, insisting that she did not laugh. And it ends with the stranger's rejoinder; "you did laugh!!" And Sarah's reply: "Did not, did not." But she did, didn't she—laughs her old heart out on the way to another disappointment?

Did the irony of it sustain her throughout the next nine months, wondering which hurt most the rheumatism or morning sickness? Did the irony of it sustain her until the child Isaac, meaning, what else, "laughter," was born? Such laughter was apparently contagious, for Genesis says that Abraham laughed "till he fell on his face," (Gen 17:17) when he heard the announcement. But, Scripture says, "the Lord made good what he had said about her" and in their old age, Sarah and Abraham had a son. Do you get it? Sometimes amid pain, struggle, and disappointment, "the Lord makes good," and joy overtakes us at last. And Sarah sums it all up brilliantly. "God has given me good reason to laugh and everybody who hears about this will laugh with me." And that's when Sarah becomes a sage and a mentor in spiritual and philosophical topics who has wisdom that comes with age and experience.

Isn't that exactly what happened to Sarah? After all those years of failed plans and futile attempts, NOW GOD TELLS US. It's like a bad joke, an incomprehensible miracle, a blessed hope. In fact, it's so ironic; all you can do is laugh. You can almost hear her cackle: "Abraham, I'm pregnant; do you think Medicare will pay for it?" There is an understandable brittleness to this laughter, ironic cynicism, and ecstatic joy all at once.

I've stumbled into irony AND SAGES in churches, all my life. Ironically, when I least expected. In August 1971, I became interim pastor of First Community Church, Southborough, MA, having moved from Texas for PhD studies at Boston University. Newly ordained at age 25, I thought I'd try to get a little pastoral experience, and the church had registered its search with BU. It was to last only to the end of the year, but in January 1972 the pastor search committee approached me, and one of the sage Deacons said, "We've been talking, and we'd like to ask you to be our pastor. We figure you can't do any worse than the people we've interviewed!" I accepted, and we moved into the parsonage right next to the church, built in 1870. The congregation was small, so it was essentially part-time. Early on, the Deacons said, "We take Communion to members who can't get to church, so away we went. But they couldn't find the portable communion kit, so the deacon and I took a bottle of Welsh's grape juice and a box of crackers and off we went to Joe and Bessie Blake's house.



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Bessie had a heart condition and couldn't attend the church where they'd been members for decades. There were pictures of Bessie in her wedding dress, and Joe in his WWI flyers uniform. He had flown with Eddie Rickenbacker in WWI. We shared communion, chatted, and prayed together. When we got up to leave, Bessie said, "Joe, why don't you lead us in the Doxology." So, sitting in their parlor, the four of us sang, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow..." Bessie, then in her 90s, died not long after, and I helped conduct her memorial service.

That simple gathering remains a sage event in my memory, a moment in time when, as a fledgling minister, I learned from my elders about the overwhelming and unexpected moment when sharing a Welsh-Ade bottle, a box of Nabisco saltines, and Oh Yes, the presence of God. It seems a small event, but I tell you today that it was a formation for ministry I'll never forget.

What do irony, humor, and downright messiness mean to the gospel task? Perhaps this: The gospel of Jesus is serious business, matters of faith and hope, life and death, good and evil. Yet while we take the gospel very seriously, we do not always take ourselves seriously, doing the gospel. We are, as St. Paul tells us, "Earthen vessels," (2 Cor. 4:7) given to numerous chips and cracks, missteps, and malapropisms in our efforts to declare God's good news. Sometimes irony is a way of sustaining us when the journey itself is long and hard, and we are not so sure about the route we have taken.

Somewhere along the way it dawned on me that besides Jesus, the thing that holds me to the Gospel is the irony of it all. To open the pages of Scripture or to read church history is to encounter the amazing irony of Divine grace. I hate dictionary definitions in sermons, but this one is too wondrous to omit. Irony, says our American Heritage Dictionary (pg692) is the "incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs." Hear that? Irony is that "incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs." The book of Hebrews said it like this: "Faith gives substance to our hopes and makes us certain of realities we do not see." Faith makes us "certain of realities we do not see;" it involves "the incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs." (Hebrews 11:1)

In the Jesus story faith and irony are mixed together from the beginning. An angel announces to a virgin named Mary that she will bear the Messiah. She visits her cousin Elizabeth who is also pregnant after having been long labeled (you guessed it) barren, and it's all so wild and joyous that whenever Mary walks past Elizabeth's belly, John the Baptist kicks the daylights out of his mother's womb. (Luke 1:41-44) | Did both those women remember Sarah and laugh or at least smile a little at their unbelievable conditions? Irony is compounded when Mary's son, a Nazarene carpenter, manufactures 180 gallons of vintage wine in the twinkling of an eye and the Gospel of John says this was the first sign that he was the Messiah—what a grand **proof** text! (John 2:1-11)



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Perhaps Christ's resurrection, like no other event, illustrates ultimate irony, "the incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs."

Ironic, radical faith can also lead us; help us, to confront life's pain; like the people struck with deep sorrows, who find comfort in the laughter of memory.

"I don't buy green bananas," my dad told me after he turned 80. He quipped, "My son's a doctor, but not the kind you take your clothes off for!" During the last week of Dad's life, a young hospital technician told me: "I was in the emergency room when your father was admitted and he was very ill, but he kept telling all these stories." "Of course," I replied, "that's what he does for a living." I should have said, that's how he keeps on living, keeps on remembering, a storyteller to the end.

And on his way out of this world, when he was terribly sick and a friend was packing his bag for the last trip to the hospital, he made sure he packed two books: a Zane Grey western and a 700-page history of World War II I gave him for his 85th birthday. When it comes time to leave this world, wouldn't it be great to grab a book or two--a 700 page one--in hopes of getting yet another page read, another tale told, another moment savored. On the way to that great getting up morning, kingdom of God, he wanted to read one more book. I love that.

Frederick Buechner, that homiletical sage who taught many of us about the ironic side of faith, says this: "That's what Jesus means when he stands in that crowd of cripples and loners and odd-balls and factory rejects and says, 'Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh.'" (Luke 6:21; Peculiar Treasures, 153.)

You see, Sarah's story isn't that far from our own. If we expect faith always to make sense; if we suppose that all the promises will be fulfilled to our liking on our schedule, we've misread a significant part of the gospel story. Grace doesn't always come as we think it should or fit neatly into our plans. Sometimes the solid rock of faith is built on the ironic, the unanticipated and the surprising. Faith flabbergasts us and the smirk of cynicism turns to the belly laugh of joy. And we learn at least one important lesson, Sarah was never barren, and neither are we. All people have value beyond our wildest expectations. In Christ, nobody is barren. In fact, "barren" is not even a word we should mess with very often.

How can we be so sure? Because, with the rest of the church, we can read Isaiah's ancient words which point us toward Jesus and the cross: "He grew up before us like a tender plant; a root out of **barren** ground; he had no beauty, that we should desire him, no grace to make us delight in him; He was despised and rejected, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and we hid our faces from him; surely he has born our grief and carried our sorrows and by his stripes we are healed." Sort of makes you want to weep, doesn't it? Or laugh, out loud, for joy. Amen.