

Oh Yes She Did

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

August 17, 2025 – A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship

Text: Genesis 17:1-5, 15-22

Sarah as we come to know her in the book of Genesis is an undisputed matriarch of the Bible. She plays a central role in the founding of what will eventually become three world religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Yet, still, while we recognize her name, we don't really know her. And we need to as she holds a key role in the foundations of our faith. We first learn of her in Genesis 11 when she appears in the genealogy of Shem, one of the sons of Noah. Yes, that Noah. She was in the 8th generation after Shem, according to this fascinating list which notes that all of the generations of male progeny from Shem, and therefore Noah, lived extraordinarily long lives – upwards of 300 years for most of them. If you do the math, which I did, Terah, Abram's father, lived 2600+/- years after Shem. Interesting, but not really relevant to our conversation about Abram and Sarai today. Theirs is a complex story which certainly covers a long time period and a lot of geography not to mention a name change for both of them. It's also intricately linked, at least initially, to the story of Lot of Sodom and Gomorrah fame who was Abram's nephew. Lot's particular story is quite fascinating, and not in the ways you might expect, but it is also way beyond the scope of this sermon which is about Sarah – a remarkable woman with an incredible story.

Sarai, who is not yet Sarah, just appears in the text as the wife Abram takes while he and his brothers are living with their father Terah in "Ur of the Chaldeans" which was a city in the Sumerian empire. It would have been located about 200 miles southeast of Baghdad in Iraq. I mention this as a reference point to give their lives geographic context. Put succinctly, Abram and

his wife Sarai, as well as his brothers and their wives would have been born and lived the first part of their lives in the place we now know as Iraq. The other brothers' wives are also listed along with their offspring but Sarai is listed as barren having had no children. At some point, Terah decides everyone is going to leave Ur and travel to Canaan but they instead end up staying in a place called Haran located in present day Turkey.

When Terah dies, the story of Abram and Sarai comes into primary focus in the text. It is at this point that the text tells us that "The Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing.'" (Genesis 12:1-2) So Abram and Sarai left as God told them to, bringing with them their entire household (read servants and slaves here) as well as Abram's nephew Lot. For the next several chapters, their journey is traced through many twists and turns including the time when they go into Egypt to find relief from the famine ravaging the countryside. Abram knew how beautiful Sarai was and that the reigning Pharaoh would find her irresistible. So, he tells Sarai to tell the Pharaoh he is her brother so that he won't be killed but instead will be treated well as her brother. Okay then. So, she does as he asks but it doesn't go quite as planned when Egypt was suddenly beset by plagues. That's when Pharaoh figured out Sarai was Abram's wife and not his sister. Pharaoh was not happy. But he let them live and continue on their way, taking all the animals and wealth, the Pharaoh had given Abram while he thought Sarai was his sister.

At this point, if you're like me, your opinion of Abram is less than favorable. But clearly God saw something in Abram that God thought he could work with so on they go with more adventures to

come. At one point, Abram has Lot go his separate way so that their mutual wealth does not become any further intertwined. Seriously. Then Lot gets them both involved in a war. At this point, Abram and God have another conversation in which Abram makes clear that he is worried that nothing is happening to allow God's promise to him of becoming the father of a mighty nation. Sarai still had not had any children and they weren't getting any younger. This conversation ends with another bizarre exchange between God and Abram ending in what is called the cutting of a covenant to cement this promise once again. This odd covenant involved cutting up a variety of animals so I'm not going into detail here. You can read it for yourself in Genesis 15.

Okay, now it's time for Sarai to enter the conversation once again. She too is tired of waiting for God's promise that she will bear a son to come into being so she takes matters into her own hands. Relying on an ancient custom as the source for the legitimacy of her actions, she sends her maid Hagar into lie with Abraham. Hagar immediately gets pregnant and Sarai gets upset because she sees Hagar as becoming too full of herself as a result of her baby with Abram. Sarai has Abram send her and the child away. God finds the pregnant Hagar beside a spring of water in the desert and tells her to return to Sarai and "submit to her." She does and gives birth to Ishmael (the ancestor of the religion of Islam) when Abram is 86 years old.

A few years later when Abram is 99 years old, God comes to him once again with the promise that he will indeed be the father of a multitude of nations. After adding the new requirement that all males of the Hebrews now need to be circumcised, God then changes Abram's name to Abraham and Sarai's name to Sarah. The name change seems to be connected to this new circumcision covenant as a demarcation for the Hebrews to clearly mark them

as different from everyone else. During this same conversation, God promises that Sarai, now Sarah, will indeed have a son even though she is now 90 years old. Abraham is skeptical and even asks that God recognize Ishmael as his official heir, but God refuses, insisting this role belongs to Sarah's child alone. Not only that, God promised Sarah would have this child within the year. And this is where the text we read this morning ends. However, Sarah's story does not end here.

This time God does not intervene with the now Abraham and Sarah directly himself. Instead, God sends three men (read angels) whom Abraham suddenly notices just standing there near to the entrance to his tent. In keeping with the deeply held tradition of hospitality in the nomadic culture, Abraham immediately invites them to come and rest awhile, have some cold water and allow him to prepare a meal for them. This all happens. The men eat and then ask about Sarah: "Where is your wife Sarah?" Abraham answers, "there, in the tent." Then one of the men responds saying he will return "in due season" and Sarah will have a son. Sarah, who is standing nearby, overhears and she laughs. Abraham himself quickly scoffs at the man's words noting all the reasons this is impossible, not the least of which is Sarah's age. The man, now identified in the text as the Lord, says, "why did Sarah laugh? Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" Hearing this Sarah denied laughing but can we blame her? How many times had she heard that before? Why wouldn't she laugh? Still, she sensed these were no ordinary men making the promise this time and she was frightened. And the man responded to her, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

Oh yes, she did. If we are to take the text at face value, Sarah laughed at God's promise and God called her on it. And, sure enough, within the promised timeframe, the old and barren Sarah

gave birth to her son Isaac and the next chapter in the history of the Hebrew people begins. We know this story of Abraham and Sarah. At least parts of it. Sarah's presence is indisputable in the pages of the Pentateuch and in our own history as Christians. But who is she really? That question is not as easy to answer as you might think. Again, when you Google Sarah, you have to be very precise that you are looking for information on "Sarah in Genesis" or even "Sarah in the Bible." Then her Wikipedia page does come up, and I'm happy to say it is a little more balanced than Eve's page. But what more is there to know about her than is easily found? For that, dear ones, we need to do some digging, and some discernment about what the information we do have reveals to us about this remarkable woman.

The most well-known and accepted thing we know about Sarah is that she had her first baby at the age of 90. Our immediate reaction to this is just what the ancient writers of this story knew it would be – shock and disbelief because such a thing is just not possible. It's a shock even to us when we've heard news stories about women in their 60's giving birth, with lots of high level medical intervention and support. But 90?? No way. Exactly the writer's point. The *only* way this could happen is with God's direct intervention. This divine intervention then proves that this child born under these circumstances is indeed special, unique and integral to God's plans for humanity. There is, in fact, a recurring motif in the Scriptures of barren women giving birth later in life, precisely to highlight the importance of their sons to God's plans. Hannah, the mother of Samson, is one example and there are more, including Elizabeth, the mother of the man who became John the Baptist in the Christian scriptures. In all cases, these women and the children they bore after years of barrenness

demonstrate over and over again that with God, nothing is impossible. Ever.

Okay. So, Sarah was the first of the matriarchs to be blessed with a child after decades of being childless. Surely, though, there is more to this woman than her ability to bear a child, even if it was through undisputably miraculous circumstances. And there is. But, we have to sift through the layers of the text to find her. For example, we know that Sarah was a woman of faith in her own right. Think of all she endured as she trudged along over dusty roads behind Abraham. They go all over the place, following God's instructions that they leave Abraham's place and go where God leads. So, she goes. She is Abraham's wife so she goes. Was she happy about all the traveling? We don't know. Given the time period in history, it most likely never occurred to her to think about whether she was happy or unhappy about all the traveling. It just was her reality. It's not difficult to imagine her trudging along, taking charge of setting up what was their household every time they would stop along the way. Getting the massive tents put up. Making sure the animals were tended to. Cooking food. Doing everything necessary to make life on the road possible. She did it, helped no doubt by the servants and slaves they had at that point. But the responsibility here for the daily needs of the household, including Abraham, were all hers.

One more thing I'd like us to revisit is this incident I already mentioned earlier. It is usually skipped over in Sunday School lessons and adult Bible studies – this story of Abraham telling Sarah to go with the Pharaoh when he pursued her, as Abraham knew he would, given Sarah's great beauty. And she did just that. To our modern sensibilities, this action of Abraham toward Sarah is just unconscionable. And, truthfully, it was even then. So why did she do it? Two reasons, I think. First, she was afraid for

herself. Pharoah was the most powerful ruler in the world at that time. Who was she to say no to him? And she was also afraid for Abraham, her husband. She believed him when he told her Pharoah would kill him if she didn't pretend to be his sister. Maybe, but scholars of this time period aren't so convinced. Pharaohs were well known to do as they wished, end of story. More likely is that as Sarai's "brother" the Pharoah would be much more likely to shower Abram with wealth, which he did. Interesting to note here is that God wasn't happy with this arrangement because soon Egypt was beset by plagues causing Pharoah to question his life choices, including Sarah. Soon Abraham and Sarah were on their way once again, but with a chunk of the wealth of Egypt coming with them, thanks to Sarah. Abraham, not so much.

But what is most significant to me about Sarah is that, if you think about it, her entire life was enmeshed with her ability, or not, to have children. The entire definition of womanhood at this time in history, and I would argue still today, is that a woman – any woman – is not "fulfilled" as a woman until she has children. This rather obvious responsibility for childbearing touches all women as their bodies remind them every month. There is no escaping it. All women have that biological clock inside them, the knowledge that the opportunity to have a child is time limited – Sarah's miracle birthing story notwithstanding. The thing we now know is that not all women feel that overwhelming need to bear a child. Many do, and that's wonderful. But there are those who don't or, more accurately, those who realize they do not want or need to birth a child to be fulfilled. Instead, they have the internal strength to acknowledge they cannot be fully themselves as they want to define themselves and still be a mother. I'm thinking now of centuries of religious sisters who set aside bearing a child to

serve God in a other ways way. I'm also thinking of professional women who decide not to have children because they don't believe they can be the kind of mothers they would want to be and still be themselves. One of the most famous women in this category is Helen Mirren, the phenomenal actor familiar to us all. She is quite open – and I would add courageous – about her decision in this regard.

Dear ones, all this is why I wanted us to stop and give deeper consideration to Sarah. A woman who walked thousands of miles across desert scrubland following a man who encouraged her to sleep with another man to suit his own ends. A woman who spent her entire life being asked by friends, family, strangers and even herself – when will I have a child? I can't even imagine how many times she must have heard that question. And we can be sure it was like a knife to her heart every single time. But still she carried on, doing what was expected of her, trying not to be angry with Abraham or God or even the slave girl who was supposed to help her solve her problem. Ultimately, Sarah's example for all of us – the reason she deserves to be remembered and honored – is that she just kept moving forward into God's future, carrying her fears, her doubts, her questions, her resentments, and her small moments of joy with her – come what may. In short, Sarah did not let the circumstances of her life defeat her. She survived them all to become the mother of three world religions we know today. In spite of all the reasons that shouldn't have been possible. Oh yes, she did. May God bless us with her strength, her resilience and her faith. Amen.