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*The* SUN  
*Still* RISES

Meditations on  
Faith at Midlife

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# INTRODUCTION



Tucked away in the biblical book of Leviticus (probably one of the least read books in the Bible!) are instructions to the Israelites to observe a Year of Jubilee every fiftieth year.\* The entire year was intended to be Sabbath time during which the Israelites were to let the land lie fallow, to let their indentured slaves go free, to return land to its rightful owners, and to forgive all debts.

Imagine! An entire year devoted to release, renewal, replenishment, and liberation. It was such a radical idea that biblical scholars debate how regularly the Israelites actually practiced it. Yet at its heart we glimpse the wisdom of a God who knows that there are times in life when we mortals need such extended seasons of Sabbath and release—for both our own flourishing and the flourishing of God's entire creation.

While I know that the original Jubilee Year was intended to be observed by an entire community, it began occurring to me at midlife that what I individually craved

\*See Leviticus 25:8–55. Since the instructions for the Jubilee Year are that it is to be observed every  $7 \times 7$  years, it is uncertain whether the year was actually meant to be observed in the forty-ninth or fiftieth year. For the sake of this book's focus on midlife challenges, I have chosen to go with the fiftieth-year hypothesis.

more than anything else was some Jubilee time for myself. By that point in life I had been working for a number of years in a job that had worn me out, worn me down, and robbed me of the joy of my vocation. Spiritually speaking, I often found myself clinging to the promise of the psalmist: “The LORD . . . shall preserve thy soul” (Ps. 121:7 KJV). I was seriously in need of soul preservation.

On the home front, I was doing what many women of my age and stage find themselves doing at midlife: juggling the many demands of parenting, pursuing a career, and keeping a household running—and often feeling that I was failing miserably at one or more of those tasks. Since I had been engaged in that juggling act for almost twenty years at that point, I was also tired. Very tired.

And so, at age fifty I took a leap in faith, resigned my tenured faculty job at a Protestant seminary, and embarked on my own Year of Jubilee.

This was definitely a risky venture, since at the time my pastor husband and I had one child in college and another on the way to college. Financially, my job resignation put a serious strain on our family. Vocationally, I wondered if anyone would ever hire me again after this precipitous move. And as a parent, I worried about what my decision would mean for my children’s educational future.

But I was also privileged in ways that many, many other folk are not—especially given that I had a working spouse who could keep bread on our table and a roof over our heads and who supported me in this decision each step of the way.

While my own Jubilee time turned out to be over a year in length, I am well aware that few people can afford to take an entire year off work. Nor do we all need to do so.

But I am convinced of two things. The first is that we all need some “Jubilee” time for renewal and reflection in our lives—whether we grab it early in the morning before our

household awakes, in the car on our way to work, through occasional day-long retreats, or through more radical measures. Claiming Sabbath time in our lives is often not as much about gaining more time as it is about prioritizing the time we have. So I hope you will view this book as an invitation to reflect creatively on how you might incorporate such Jubilee time in the rhythms of your own life, whatever they may be.

The second conviction I have is that midlife is an especially fertile season for getting off life's treadmill and taking stock, to make sure the direction in which we are heading is the one in which we want to keep going. For many people at midlife, the pace of life is so frenetic and full that we have almost no time to "let the land lie fallow." But it is especially at that juncture at life that we need to ask some hard questions of God and of ourselves:

- Am I on a vocational path that gives me deep meaning and joy, and if not, what other paths might I pursue?
- What are those things that feed my soul and spirit—rather than depleting them—and how might I expose myself to more of them?
- What are the debts I need to forgive, and how might I begin and continue the hard work of forgiveness?
- How can the losses I am confronted with at this stage in life—whether they be death, the ending of a relationship, job loss, or an empty nest—open me to the new possibilities that God might have in store for my life?

My own Jubilee Year involved a lot of early-morning prayer and sun-porch sitting. (We had a sunporch in our home at that time, which became my personal sanctuary.) I knew that prayer was going to be critical to my healing and renewal, so I embraced it for as long as I desired each

day. I also limited my reading to books that fed my soul and spirit. Consequently, I read a lot of poetry, a number of volumes on feminist spirituality (including Sister Joan Chittister's entire corpus), and books that nurtured creative aspects of my being (especially books on creative writing). In addition I took on only those tasks that I truly wanted to take on: no "oughts" or "shoulds" allowed. Among the new activities I embraced were forming and leading a group called FRAWG—the Feminist Reading and Worship Group—at my local church (with an acronym like FRAWG, how could anyone accuse of us being "angry feminists"?) and volunteering at a mission and outreach center of our church where mothers who had been referred by social service organizations came to secure diapers, baby clothes, formula, and other items. Hearing the stories of these women survivors—many of them recent immigrants to the United States—was not only inspirational but also pivotal for helping me see my own very privileged life and its struggles within a larger perspective.

During the early months of my Jubilee Year, I began writing some of the meditations that eventually found their way into this book. I continued that practice off and on for the next fourteen years—writing especially during seasons when I was facing major life challenges, when I was overwhelmed by joy and gratitude, or when I simply had the time and space and inspiration to do so.

At first I wrote both as a way of expressing my newfound freedom from academia (I could write anything I wanted, and in any way that I wanted!) and as a form of self-therapy (to help me work through the deep woundedness of the previous work years and to try to make some sense of them). I also wrote as a way of sticking my feet back in the water since, along with losing the joy of teaching, I had lost the joy of my first vocational love, preaching. I found that writing these briefer reflections allowed me



to do what I loved best about sermon writing: to reflect on ordinary life in relation to what the Scriptures tell us about God and faith.

Finally, I wrote because I sensed the Holy Spirit prompting me to do so. As I would sit on that sunporch in the early mornings, praying and reading and, as I liked to put it, “wasting time with God,” times would often come when I sensed the Spirit urging me to go to the computer and record the insights of the morning. The writing became a way of transitioning from my formal prayer time into the other activities of the day.

The Christian faith has been bedrock for me throughout my life, that one sure thing on which I can stake my existence and out of which I seek to interpret all that happens within it. So quite naturally, these writings are about not just my own life but how to make sense of life—with all its paradoxes and challenges—in light of that faith. The faith I speak of here is not static or simplistic or exclusivist. It is a faith open to ever-expanding understandings of God and nature and the world, and that does not always try to tie things up in neat theological packages. Faith is messy, like everyday life. And my own faith consistently looks to the biblical witness, and to the triune God revealed there, as a lens through which to make sense of life with, for, and in God.

But faith is also eternally hopeful. And my own sincere desire is that this book might help people to reflect more deeply on the messy life experiences they are going through and to find God and the hope of the gospel in the midst of them.

This book’s title, *The Sun Still Rises*, reflects the nature of Christian hope. It was a mantra I first embraced during my year of battling cancer, as I would sit out on my sunporch early each morning, wrapped in a quilt, praying, and waiting for the sun to rise. No matter what life deals us, if

the sun still rises anew each morning, we are given assurance that our Creator God is still in control of this world, that there is still some order and regularity to the ways of the universe, and that we can place our lives into God's safe keeping. The title also echoes resurrection themes and trust in the rising of the "Son of Righteousness," who walks with us into the long nights of life's heartbreaks and tragedies, comforting and consoling us, while also holding before us the promised dawn of a new day to come.

I am certainly not the only person who, at midlife—loosely defined as forty-five to sixty-five years old—has gone through job loss, the quest for new vocational and personal identity, or a battle with life-threatening illness. Nor am I the only person who rediscovered at midlife new delight in nature, new satisfaction in reconnecting with old friends, or new joy in growing older with my beloved spouse while embracing the marvelous new vocation of grandparenting. I am also not the only woman who has wrestled with patriarchy in the workplace, with war and its ethical challenges, with how to be a good mother to adult children, or with life during and after breast cancer.

Stages of midlife faith development are reflected here—not in the sequential way some scholars in faith development describe them—but in the messy way in which mature adults go through a series of events and life situations that can either make us stronger or wear us down—and sometimes do both simultaneously. While I'm not sure any of us ordinarily wakes up in the morning thinking, "Wow, I'm growing in faith and wisdom!" we can sometimes look back on our lives and see God's hand in the patterns of our lives and see how, slowly but surely, our mettle has been tested and our faith has been strengthened through the ups and downs we have been through with God.

This book is a hybrid: part memoir—as I chronicle fourteen years of my life (ages fifty to sixty-four) and its

struggles and celebrations, and part devotional book—as I reflect on that life through the lens of faith. Each section heading in the book indicates the ages I was when I wrote the meditations included in it. Though most of these meditations begin with a story about me and one of my life experiences, I have also tried to identify through those stories the larger issues of faith and life that confront many of us at midlife and to reflect on them from the vantage point of a thoughtful faith. I have concluded most of these meditations with a suggested Scripture reading and with questions “For Further Reflection.” My hope is that my reflections will spur you to embrace your own Jubilee time, asking significant questions of yourself and of God and entering into the kind of prayerful conversation with God that can lead to new insights and revelation. Space is provided if you would like to use this book as a workbook, jotting down the answers you would make to those questions as you reflect on them.

You may read the meditations in this book in any order that you choose. If you are battling illness, you might choose to start with the meditations in the section that bears that name. If you are wrestling with vocation and vocational identity, “Jubilee Time” is a good place to begin. If you are on vacation, reveling in the beauty of nature, try starting with “Nature the Nurturer.”

When I started writing this book, my two children were both in college. Now they are adults with vocations of their own. When I started writing this book, I had recently resigned my job as a tenured faculty person at a Protestant seminary to embark on my “Jubilee Year.” Since that time, I have served for five years on the staff of a large New York City “avenue” church, where I ran a seminary for lay people, and for ten years on the faculty of a university divinity school, where I teach preaching. There has definitely been life after my Jubilee Year and after my year

with cancer (which this book also chronicles). And I have tried to live life differently and more intentionally than I did before I embarked on these life-changing experiences.

I know that not everyone has the luxury of taking a full Year of Jubilee. But I also believe there are ways to structure our everyday lives that allow us to glimpse God's will for Jubilee in their midst and to live toward it. Most of all I believe that God wants us to live these midlife years fully, freely, and joyfully—embracing all that God has in store for us, while also facing the challenges that come our way with faith and courage.

*Nora Tubbs Tisdale*  
*Pentecost 2016*

# REBORN TO THE ORDINARY



Yesterday afternoon, as I was running errands in my car, I tuned in to “This American Life” on my local NPR station. I love this program, not only because of the quirky way in which it excavates real life in all its earthy richness through the stories of ordinary people, but also because of the connection it affords me with my beloved daughter, Leonora. Leonora has been a fan of this program since her high school days and has long urged me to listen to it. When I turned on the radio and heard the familiar yet unusual voice of the show’s host, Ira Glass, the melancholy music that is woven throughout its segments, and the announcement that this particular show was going to be centered on telling the stories of five people who thought they were going to die and how the experience changed their lives, I was hooked.

The opening story was told by a man named Kevin Kelly who used to be a reporter, traveling the world and encountering many religions as he went.\* He told of the confusion that arose in his soul about his faith and how he came to a place in life where he had no idea what he should believe, or even why he should believe at all. One night, when he was in Jerusalem covering a story related to the gathering of Jews and Christians in that city to celebrate Passover and Easter, he returned to his hostel past the posted curfew hour and was locked out. He was in a strange city with literally nowhere to lay his head.

So for hours that night, he wandered the old Holy City of Jerusalem, taking respite in the only buildings still open: some churches. Finally, he found his way into the

\*Kevin Kelly, “Shoulda Been Dead: Act 1. Die in Six Months,” Program 50, *This American Life*, National Public Radio, first aired on January 17, 1997. I heard a rebroadcast of the program in 2002.

Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where he spent the remaining hours until dawn resting on the mound where Jesus was supposed to have been crucified. When dawn came on Easter morning, he went to the tombs area of Jerusalem, where he joined other pilgrims who were sitting in folding chairs in front of one of the empty tombs. Suddenly, he knew in the core of his being that it was true. Jesus had risen from the dead. He began asking God what he should do with his life, now that faith had been kindled within him. And the idea that came to him was that he should live as if he were going to die in six months.

Although this young man had always thought he would do something especially adventuresome—like skydiving or climbing Mt. Everest—if he knew death was imminent, he found instead that his deepest desire was to reconnect with the ordinary. So he moved back home for three months, spending time with his parents and puttering around the house and yard. Then he bicycled across the country for three months to visit each of his five siblings, sleeping at night under the stars in the backyards of people who let him pitch his tent on their property, often sharing a cup of coffee or tea with them over conversations in the evenings. He also cleaned out his bank account, sending anonymous monetary gifts to people he knew and loved. It was, he said, the first genuinely altruistic thing he had ever done in his life.

The hardest part of believing you're going to die, he said, is not being able to think about a future. How difficult it is to hear a piece of music and to imagine that you might never hear it again. Or to see something beautiful you want to show someone else and to think you will never get the chance. The loss of the future, he said, was the hardest part.

At the end of his bicycle sojourn, this young man returned to his parents' home just in time for Halloween—fully

expecting not to wake up the day after. He had completely convinced himself he was going to die, and Halloween marked the end of the six months since he vowed to live until he died. When he did actually awake the next morning, he was overwhelmed by the enormous sense of life's giftedness. He was not dead; he was alive. "I was *reborn into ordinariness*," he said, "but what more could I ask for?" (emphasis added). And within his soul there was deep-rooted joy at the prospect of being able to regain a future lived in ordinary time.

As I listened, it dawned on me that what I most desire this Jubilee Year is to be reborn to the ordinary. I long for freedom and space from my overcommitted, anxiety-producing, run-about public life in which simply to "be" and to rediscover the simple pleasures that are all around me. I want to take morning walks, to read, to pray, to watch birds feed and deer graze, to plant flowers, to cook for the fun of it, to sit with my beloved spouse before dinner, drinking wine while reflecting on our respective days. I want to write notes to people I'm thinking of, to wrap care packages for my children in other places, to cook a meal for a person in need, and to volunteer for something I believe in.

Last week I saw a television special in which Paul McCartney was interviewed by his daughter about his life. Sir Paul recounted how, at one point after the Beatles had dissolved and he was depressed and uncertain about the future, he and his family simply "dropped out" of their fast-paced, notorious life for a season; moved to a small, remote farm in Scotland; and rediscovered the ordinary. It was obvious, as he and his daughter reminisced—about the time and about their life with their wife/mother Linda (who later died of breast cancer), and as they flashed pictures on the screen of themselves tromping through sheep pastures in knee boots or riding horseback through an

open field—that this season of their family’s life had been one of their happiest. It was ordinary time, imbued and infused with the holiness of life lived fully in community with nature and with those beloved.

I hunger for such ordinary time. Who knows when death will come to me, my husband, our children, our parents, our siblings? Whenever it comes, I don’t want to feel cheated by its advent. I don’t want to feel that I’ve missed “being”—and being with those I love. Instead, I would prefer to face death with the knowledge that I have lived each day fully in the presence of the ordinary—so that the ordinary becomes revelatory to me of the lovely, miraculous, extraordinary grace of its Creator and Sustainer.

So I’m going to get a book on trees so that I can enjoy by name the majestic trees in my new backyard; and a book on birds so that I can identify and greet the birds that come to the feeder. I’m going to plant flowers, talk to the deer who roam our yard, discover how to use fresh herbs in cooking, buy more jazz albums, learn how to entertain simply (so I can savor time with our guests rather than spending all my time frustrated in preparation), take swing dance lessons with my husband, light candles, listen to the rain on the roof, get to know the children in our church, and enjoy the company of newfound friends. I’m also going to email the transcript of yesterday’s program to my daughter. She, who excels in living each day fully, would love it. I know.

**Scripture Reading:** Matthew 6:25–34

### **For Further Reflection**

- If you were to be “reborn to the ordinary,” what aspects of your life would you like to give up?
- What aspects would you like to attend to more closely?
- How might you incorporate more “being” and less “doing” into your daily life rhythms?



# THE ORCHID PLANT



My husband and I laugh about our orchid plant. He says it would win a prize at a county fair for having the lushest, greenest, thickest leaves of all. He likens them—because of their thickness and texture—to portabella mushrooms. The only problem is, this plant never blooms.

The plant was a gift from dear friends who stayed with us several years ago. We were out of town for the last few days of their visit, and when we returned home a beautiful orchid was sitting on our dining room table as an expression of their thanks. Its delicate purple-pink blossoms delighted us for several weeks as it bloomed, and when the petals withered and died, I trusted more would soon appear. But in two years they never have.

For the first year of its life, my neglect hindered the well-being of this plant. Those were stressful years during which I treated the orchid with the same sort of benign neglect I treat the other plants in our household—giving it an occasional douse of water and trusting it would care for itself. When various little brown spikes started appearing at its base without blooming, I cut them off.

About a year ago, I met a florist at a party and told her about my plant. She looked appalled when I told her I had cut off the brown stems. “Those are the roots!” she said. Instead of a small dose of water several times a week, she encouraged me to give the orchid a thorough watering once a week—preferably on the same day—with tepid water. “When you get ready to water it, mix some orchid food in with warm water, and then pour it over the plant for about thirty seconds—as you hold the plant over the sink—until the medium around it is saturated. Let the excess drain off.

And then just let the plant sit in the sun until the next week when you water it again. If you do this," she promised, "it should start blooming in about six to eight weeks."

For the past year, I have faithfully heeded her advice, and with good results. This plant now has the lushest, thickest leaves of any orchid I have ever seen. And one of its roots is now quite lengthy, stretching out to meet the sun. But the plant has yet to bloom.

It occurred to me how much my orchid is a metaphor for my life during this Jubilee Year. For the first time in my life, I am basking in the sun and letting my starved soul be drenched in the warm and welcoming waters of rebirth and renewal. I have felt my roots growing longer, stretching out toward the sun that is life to me. I am back in touch with the basics I need for living—water, air, spirit, food—and I know that I am healthier than I was some months before I started this journey. My leaves—once a sickly pale green—are now lush and vibrant, a deep jade green. My survival is no more in question. I am strong, I am healthy, and I am once again fully alive.

But I also know, way down in the depths of my soul, that I haven't yet bloomed. Though I am beginning to tap into sources of creativity that have lain dormant for far too many years, I have yet to produce those delicate blossoms that delight the heart and fill the soul with joy. I have yet to discover the fullness of all that God intends for me to become.

Just as it takes many months to stifle beauty and creativity in a growing plant or person, so too, it takes many months to restore and resurrect them. The leaves are the first sure sign of renewed health and vitality. But leaves alone are not enough. God wants us to blossom and flourish.

In John's Gospel, Jesus is aware that his disciples are heading for tough times. He will soon be leaving them, and

he knows that they will become disheartened and discouraged and spent. So he tells them what they must do to keep their lives healthy and strong. “Abide in me,” he says, “as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:4–5).

Often when we get pushed and stressed in life, the first thing we let go are those very spiritual practices that ground us in God and make us healthy, productive human beings. Worship becomes sporadic; we have little time for prayer; our Bibles collect dust on our shelves. Ironically, though we may think we are letting go of those parts of our lives that are not as “productive” as others, we are actually cutting off our own roots. We are separating ourselves from the one true Vine that can nurture and nourish us and make us bloom.

“Abide in me . . .” Jesus says, “so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (John 15: 4a, 11b).

**Scripture Reading:** John 15:1–11

### **For Further Reflection**

- Using the image of an orchid, how would you assess the state of your own spiritual health these days? Are your leaves glossy and strong or withering and pale? Are you blossoming or simply putting forth abundant foliage? Are your roots getting that which they need to sustain and nourish them? Or are you, by neglect, cutting them off from their source of health and life?
- What new practices might you need to undertake to nourish that most precious of plants—your soul and spirit?

# A RAINBOW ON MY FOOT



A crazy thing happened to me last Sunday morning. I was standing in the shower, getting ready to go to church, when I looked down and behold there was a rainbow across my foot. No, I'm not speaking metaphorically here. I'm speaking literally. The shower stall—with its clear glass door—stands right across from a window in our small bathroom, and somehow the sun was refracted through both sets of glass so as to create a rainbow on my right foot. All I had to do was move my foot an inch or so in the right direction, and the rainbow literally formed an arch across my entire foot.

The fact that this bow appeared on my *right* foot is important, because just the day before I had been looking at that particular foot in a shoe store mirror, bemoaning its disfigured state. I used to have feet that matched pretty well, but I don't any longer. Ever since I had surgery on my right ankle some months ago, my right foot has been a lot larger than my left. Finding shoes that fit both feet now is nigh unto impossible. And the right ankle always looks swollen—like my arthritic eighty-year-old grandmother's ankles always looked. Add to that reality the numerous visible, broken, and varicose veins in that ankle, and you've got an ugly sight. An old foot on a woman who considers herself, at age fifty, still young.

But here I was—on a Sunday morning in the Easter season—standing in the shower, the water cascading over my body, with a rainbow on my foot! I don't quite know what to make of it, but it does remind me of two sermons I've heard.

The first is actually a sermon I preached a number

of years ago to a group of pastors. In it I contrasted the images that were found in two of the biblical lectionary readings for the day in order to talk about the joys and the tribulations of ministry. In the first reading from Isaiah 52, the prophet celebrates the feet of messengers who bring the good news of God's peace, calling them "beautiful." I used this text to evoke memories of times in ministry when the proclamation of good news has been celebrated and received in joy and thanksgiving and gratitude by parishioners. Times when people have come out the door after worship and said to their pastor, "My, your feet are beautiful!"

In the text from Galatians 4, on the other hand, the apostle Paul is angry and frustrated by his congregation's lack of receptivity to the gospel he proclaims. He tells them he is having "labor pains" because they refuse to allow Christ to be born within them. Indeed, they are resisting this birth—and their own rebirth—so much that the apostle is unable to deliver the gospel in their midst.

Like the prophets of old, ministers today can also encounter strenuous resistance to the good news of God's coming reign of justice and righteousness and peace—especially when the inauguration of that reign will be costly to the hearers. So preachers also know what it is like to stand at the door after church and have their beloved congregants greet them, not with praise for their beautiful feet, but with anger over their prophetic witness.

The second sermon is one I heard preached by a favorite pastor of mine during the Vietnam War. At a time when our nation desperately longed for an all-too-elusive peace, this pastor/prophet used the Genesis 9 text about Noah and the flood to remind us of God's promise to us through the rainbow. By taking a common weapon of war, the bow, and bending it and placing it in the sky, God has given us a multicolored promise that, one day, all weapons of war will be turned into plowshares, spears changed into pruning

hooks, and nations will not study war any more (see Isa. 2:4). One day God will redeem all death—including those caused by war—and shall bring to birth out of this world's wickedness a new reign of life, refracted in light and hope.

What does all this have to do with my foot? Frankly, I'm not altogether sure I know. But I do have an inkling or two.

A pastoral counselor I know says that whenever we have a serious ache in a body part it is also symbolic of something else going on in our lives. She visited me right after I first broke my ankle and laid this pearl of wisdom on me right after hearing about how difficult my vocational life had been in recent months. When I heard it, I laughed out loud. "And what," I asked incredulously, "does my broken ankle have to do with anything that has been going on in my life in recent years?" Without missing a beat she replied, "Do you have any idea how many times you have used language with me today that has to do with feet and standing? Time and again you have said, 'I had to leave. I didn't have a choice. There was simply no place left where I could safely stand.' Is it any wonder that it is your ankle that has been broken?"

I don't know what it means to have a rainbow appear across my foot on a Sunday morning. But I'll take it as a sign of promise: Promise of a coming day in which God's justice will reign so that all people—even those who, like the martyrs, bear in their bodies the brokenness of this world's unjust powers—have a place where they can safely and securely stand. Promise of a coming time when the labor pains of breached births give way to the glorious liberty of the children of God. And promise of a day in which God will take even the most bruised and swollen and misshapen of feet and, through redemptive power, turn them into something beautiful—absolutely beautiful.

**Scripture Reading:** Genesis 9:8–17; Isaiah 52:7–10

**For Further Reflection**

- Do you currently have a physical ailment or pain that might be symbolic of something larger going on in your life? If so, what is it, and what does it signify for you?
- Have you ever heard a messenger of God’s peace speak something so hopeful and so profound that you thought his or her feet were beautiful? Reflect on that messenger and what it was about the message that made it so life-giving for you.
- What does the image of the rainbow—with its promise of God’s peace—mean to you in your current life situation?