



## Part I—Finding Our Resilience

### LESSON TWO

# Mary “of a Certain Village”



#### SCRIPTURE

Luke 10:38–42

#### MAIN IDEA

Mary’s story teaches us that spending time listening to and learning from Jesus is the better part.

#### Opening Prayer

*Loving God, we thank you for the ministry of Mary “of a certain village.” Guide us, dear Christ, through her witness of studying your word, that we may follow her in being faithfully devoted to you and renewed for your service. We praise you now and forever. Amen.*

#### SUMMARY

We started with Mary Magdalene, the Tower, in the Gospel of John. Next, we move to the Gospel of Luke, where we encounter Mary “of a certain village.” In the Luke 10 passage, many of us see this Mary as a passive woman, sitting at Jesus’ feet and listening to his word. While this is one image of Mary, we will focus on how her witness as a woman disciple of Jesus, who experienced challenges, can model resilience for us, as she forges her identity as a follower of Christ.

#### LESSON

We all experience challenges at times, and sometimes others project their anxiety upon us. Those who are different from others are not always valued, and sometimes others try to pressure them into being

more like themselves. One woman who followed a different path was Mary “of a certain village.” We assume that Mary is from Bethany, but the beginning of verse 38 reads, “Now as they went on their way, [Jesus] entered a certain village” (10:38). Luke does not name the village, thus the title of this Lesson is Mary “of a certain village.” We do not know a lot about Mary, but she is lifted up as one whose witness and passion for the gospel we should emulate.

I have a sister who is just a few years older than me. We shared a room at home when we were growing up. And, when we were young adults, we lived together. People called us “the Hunter girls.” A couple of times, we even received Christmas gifts with both of our names on it, which made it hard for us to share the gift, as at that time we lived in different cities! I think some people did not see us as individuals, but as “those two sisters.”

### Listening to the Quiet Ones

I contend that it is hard for us to see individual sisters in this passage in Luke. We tend to use both sisters’ names when we refer to the passage, Mary and Martha. So, let me clearly state that the focus of this lesson is on the quiet one, the one who studied with Jesus, the one who did not speak back to her sister. As a matter of fact, she is completely silent in this passage.

We often misread the thoughts and motivations of those who are quiet types. They do not tend to share their thoughts as much as those of us who tend to be verbose, and sometimes they have facial expressions that we read into and misinterpret. They often do not even correct us when we make incorrect assumptions about them, so we are not sure what they are thinking.

Many of the relatives in my family are quiet people—yes, I know that is hard to believe if you know me. They use an economy of words. Some of you are also quiet people. You go about your

work silently, without the need for a megaphone announcing your comings and goings. You are the lifeblood of the church, attending to things before the rest of us even know they need attending to. And many of you are very wise and quiet, a winning combination. So when you speak, we all get quiet, because we want to know what you have to say. Unfortunately, many of you also suffer in silence, facing challenges on your own without communicating a lot about what you are going through.

### New Insights into an Old Story

We know this story in Luke so well that it is hard for us to see something new in it. The action takes place in Martha’s home. Luke 10:38 reads, “a woman named Martha welcomed [Jesus] into her home.” So, it is not the home of a male relative, nor is it Mary’s, but the house is Martha’s. This may be similar to “the Hunter girls” getting a Christmas gift together, though we no longer lived in the same city. Even so, people associated us together.

Do you notice who is not in the passage? Lazarus. There is no mention of another sibling in the house. Some of us have assumed that Jesus visited his three friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany, but while this may be what our Christian tradition has inferred, it is not found in Luke 10. The women in the Lukan passage do not have a brother.

And, when it comes to Mary, we end up speculating on her motivations because they are not communicated. As we discussed in the previous lesson, we must take into account that the Gospels were written in an androcentric (male-centered) environment. In light of this, maybe there is a reason why Mary is silent in this encounter. Some believe that a portrayal of Mary as docile is what the Gospel writer thought was a good model for women.

Others over the years have seen Jesus’ defense of Mary as sanctioning women’s scholarship

and theological education. This is amazing, as women were excluded from studying the Hebrew Scriptures. It is significant for Jesus to publicly state that "Mary has chosen the better part." Jesus goes on to say, "which will not be taken away from her" (10:42). So, this woman's choice is fully supported by Jesus. Mary sits at Jesus' feet, just as male disciples did, learning from and listening to him. An annotation in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* reads, "Jesus approved Mary's preference for listening to his teaching (thereby accepting a woman as a disciple)."<sup>9</sup>

Imagine how Mary might express her faithfulness as she serves in different ways from her sister Martha.

*I have never been more hungry to learn. What a privilege to be able to sit and learn with Jesus. This rabbi is different, so welcoming and filled with God's spirit. I wonder if I were not in my sister's home, if a woman like me would be allowed to sit with the men while Jesus brings the scriptures to life?*

*Of course, I notice the disapproving looks from my sister Martha, but I am where I am supposed to be. It was humiliating when Martha spoke to Jesus about me and said in front of everyone that I was not helping her. But it is amazing that Jesus said I chose the better part, which will not be taken away from me. Looking back on this, Jesus has encouraged me, and we have become good friends.*

Jesus says Mary's choice is better. Even though she is criticized for the way she chooses to serve and devote herself to Christ, Jesus commends her. Another annotation in a revised edition of *The Oxford NRSV Bible* reads, "This story affirms

the importance of listening to Jesus and gives further details about women among Jesus's followers . . . Luke's emphasis is on the singular importance of discipleship: Mary sat at Jesus feet (see 8.35; Acts 22.3)."<sup>10</sup>

### **Mary in John, Mary in Luke**

You will recall from Lesson 1 that Elizabeth Schrader Polczer uncovered in her research a major textual problem in the manuscripts of the Gospel of John. In Papyrus 66, she saw where a scribe changed Mary's name to Martha. Schrader Polczer demonstrates in her research that sometime in the second century, a scribe altered the oldest text of the Gospel of John and split the character of Mary into two. Mary became Mary and Martha. Note that the textual problem is in the Gospel of John, not in Luke. Martha still exists in Luke 10:38–42.

Schrader Polczer suggests that in John's gospel, we have conflated Mary and Martha from Luke, but that these two sisters don't actually show up in the Gospel of John. She argues that the Mary whose name was changed in a scribal interpolation in one of the earliest texts of John 11 and 12, was Mary Magdalene.

Schrader Polczer says that Lazarus was Mary Magdalene's brother, that Bethany the village of Mary refers to her, and that she anointed Jesus and confessed him as the Messiah.

Another annotation in *The Oxford NRSV Bible* reads, "Mary is known in the tradition for anointing Jesus (John 12:1–11). Another, probably different pair of sisters named Mary and Martha, appear in Lk. 10:38–42."<sup>11</sup>

9 Metzger and Murphy, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, annotation on Luke 10:42, 98 NT.

10 Michael D. Coogan, Marc Z. Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and Pheme Perkins, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, New Revised Standard Version*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), annotation on Luke 10:38–2, 1890.

11 Coogan, Brettler, Newsom, and Perkins, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, annotation on John 11:2, 1938.

How have we missed this? Certainly, annotations that reflect the latest biblical scholarship are added, but did we neglect to read these notes? Have we not looked at a new study Bible in a while and missed the notes? Or is it that we know the story so well that we did not think we needed to read it again or reflect upon it?

If you are trying to wrap your head around which Mary is in John's Gospel—and if she is also the one in Luke—you join many who are learning that something old is new, though the editors of *The Oxford NRSV Bible* apparently do not need convincing. It is apparent that Mary “of a certain village” is in the Gospel of Luke, but she does not appear to be the one who anointed Jesus in the Gospel of John. Nor is she the one in John when Jesus raises Lazarus to life. There is a Johannine tradition and a Lukan tradition, and though it is easy to conflate the two, they are distinct.

### Sister vs. Sister

We know that this story is here in scripture to guide Martha (and us) away from distractions and toward devotion to God's word, but it is hard not to notice and think about what happened to Mary. If she was still sitting at Jesus' feet when Martha complained about her to Jesus, the words of her sister were probably hurtful, as they were most likely intended to be. Instead of asking her sister for help directly, Martha embarrassed Mary by announcing her idleness in front of Jesus and others.

Have you ever been minding your own business and had a sibling or friend drag you into the middle of a conflict? Many of us know what it is like to have someone tattle on you to an authority figure. Those of us in the workforce may have

had the experience of working closely with a colleague and learning that instead of that colleague coming to you directly to discuss something that was an issue, they went to a supervisor. This is especially hurtful when it occurs between women. Instead of your sister-sibling friend coming to you to discuss a matter, they go to a man to mediate the dispute.

I wonder if Jesus would have entered into this conflict at all if Martha had not prompted him? The text reads, “But the Lord answered her” (10:41). So, clearly, the initial conversation began with Martha, who initiated action.

I always liked Mary in Luke. I appreciated that this woman was so faithful, devoted, and able to sit with the male disciples and learn from Jesus. I liked Mary because I was supposed to like her. The story was designed so I would like her. The story initially focuses on Martha. Many of the lines are Martha's, yet Mary is the one lifted up as the model of a faithful woman, who has chosen the better part.

Theologian Veronica Koperski wrote, “I had tended to identify with Mary. However, many, perhaps the majority, of Christian women (at least those of my generation and older) strongly identify with Martha and resent what is perceived as the unfairness to her portrayed in this passage in liturgical preaching.”<sup>12</sup>

Jane Schaberg and Sharon Ringe note, “Popular literature and traditions associated with Martha give evidence that many women have long been uncomfortable with this familiar story, which pits sister against sister.”<sup>13</sup> Why is it necessary to tear down one woman in order to build up another?

12 Veronica Koperski, “Women and Discipleship in Luke 10:38–42 and Acts 6:1–7: The Literary Context of Luke-Acts” in *A Feminist Companion to Luke*, eds. Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 162.

13 Jane D. Schaberg and Sharon H. Ringe, “Gospel of Luke,” in *Women's Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed., eds. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 507.

*Activity*

Identify a time, either in the past or currently, when you were challenged by a sibling or friend, even though you were seeking to do good. Journal how you felt when it happened. Explore how you will move through (or have already moved through) to get to the other side of this challenge to resiliency.

If we were to rewrite this biblical story, we might have Martha come to Mary and say,

*"I didn't realize I needed it, but I really do need your help with all of this work. Mary, will you help me?"*

I would like to believe that her sister would say,

*"Sure, what do you need?"*

Mary could also say,

*"Martha, will you please come over here for just a moment and sit with me. This is so good listening to Jesus. I really want to share this time of listening and learning from Jesus with you."*

I would like to believe that Martha would have put down whatever was in her hands and gone to be with her sister.

Even if this sisterly understanding is a pipe dream and a few more words need to be said, and time has to pass in order to come to an understanding, cannot these women sort out their differences among themselves? Does Jesus have to be the one to mediate the dispute?

**Faith and Works**

Apart from a story about two sisters, what if something more significant is happening here? Is it possible that a theological dispute is underlying this story? Could it be that the story was told so that those of us who are Marthas might resist allowing

our subconscious theology of works over faith to operate without checking ourselves?

The Reformed tradition's doctrine of justification by faith alone reminds us that salvation comes only through faith and trust in God. Good works matter, but they are not the basis for our salvation. Works are the evidence of salvation not the justification for it. Martha's good works are not what will save her. She is (and we, too, are) called back to the better part that Mary embraces, that is faith in Christ alone.

We have read Jesus used these words with numerous people, "your faith has saved you." And even though some performed an action (works) prior to Jesus sharing these words, he said that what saved the person was their faith (justification by faith alone).

In her innovative article on this passage, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza states that the Martha and Mary conflict was potentially between "two competing types or roles of discipleship: diakonia-service and listening to the word."<sup>14</sup> Even those who serve and have a number of tasks to complete need to learn when to stop and spend time with Christ. Serving at tables and distributing food and goods to those in need is important, and so is devotion, preparing to share Jesus' word and acknowledging Christ in your home.

*Activity*

Have you had a time in your life when you were filled with God's spirit and had a profound devotional practice? What were the circumstances surrounding this strong connection to God and discipline of devotion? Discuss what "the better part" might be for you.

### Mary as a Model of Resilience

Being resilient helps us to stand up to challenge and contribute to the good. The opposite of resiliency is being incapable of functioning, emotionally stuck, unable to cope with change or being so stressed out that we have difficulty working, leading, and thriving. Those who are resilient are survivors of stress, conflict and hardships, and they tend to thrive well in change. In this Bible study, we are exploring resiliency, and I propose that Mary “of a certain village” is a model of resilience, possessing an identity found in Jesus Christ.

Mary was a woman who chose devotion and contemplation over everything else. It is pretty amazing that she was able to differentiate and make this choice, as it was not conventional for her time. She chose what was better, even though her sister accused her of doing something that was not good. All Mary was accused of, though, is sitting, and she was not just sitting, but listening to and learning from Jesus.

This passage directs us to choose contemplation and devotion. We do not know Mary’s experience, but I can imagine that it was not easy to be the only woman in the room studying scripture and learning from Jesus. And while women are sometimes criticized for their choices, the way through stress and challenge and towards resiliency is found in devotion and contemplation.

How many times has praying, singing, reading, and reflecting on the words of the faith saved you from even greater difficulties?

Though many of you may identify with Mary’s sister Martha, and keep yourselves busy, you also have at crucial times focused on stillness, serenity, and contemplation with Jesus. You may think that you are either one way or the other, but you are multifaceted people. You are both Mary and Martha, and without these sides, your contributions to the church would not be as remarkable.

In Lesson 3, we will look at Jesus Christ as a model of resilience. For now, though, what we see in the Gospel of Luke is a woman who seemed to know that when Jesus is in your home, spending time listening and learning from the Messiah is the better part.

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### Closing Prayer

*We give you thanks, O God, for sisters, siblings, and friends who are part of our extended families and for opportunities for devotion, contemplation, and growing in faith. Help us to learn that it is never too late to seek and receive your renewing Spirit and to be sent out for service and witness in the world. Guide us in the ways of peace and justice, even in stressful times. We worship and adore you. Amen.*

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### Reflection Questions

1. What exactly was “the better part” that Mary chose, and that Jesus praised her for?
2. What changes would you have to make to choose “the better part”?
3. How do you suppose Mary moved through conflict to resilience?
4. Name a time when you had resilience, empowering you to thrive in life.
5. What will you do today to chart a new path that embodies spirituality and devotion to Christ?



## Suggestions for Leaders

### LESSON TWO: Mary “of a certain village”

#### Central Concept

The story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38–42 draws a clear contrast between Mary's choice—taking the opportunity to listen attentively to Jesus, and Martha's action—being “worried and distracted by many things,” in Jesus' words. Jesus keeps the focus on Mary's transformational choice of the role of a disciple. The author helps us explore the resilience that requires and connects that resilience to Mary's choosing “the better part,” namely, finding her identity in Jesus.

#### Connect

(15 minutes) Welcome everyone and offer the lesson's Opening Prayer.

Read aloud the lesson's Summary. Note that this is the second of three lessons on resilience, and as we will see throughout the study, resilience is grounded in knowing our identity is bound to Jesus, the one we follow.

Ask these focus questions. The first two can be discussed in pairs and the third in the whole group.

1. Have you ever found yourself thinking that it's hard to claim your place when men's work is valued more highly than women's work? Describe that time. How did that feel?
2. Have you experienced times when you found yourself with value and access you didn't expect? How did that feel?
3. Recall a time when you found yourself in a group/community/situation that consistently valued you and your true identity. Name the situation and say what that meant to you.

#### Consider

(5 to 10 minutes) Explore this story about Martha and Mary by clarifying the distinction between this Martha and Mary and the Martha and Mary in John 11—the story of the death and raising of Lazarus. If you have time, summarize the information in the lesson's section “Mary

in John, Mary in Luke,” explaining the theory that both the Martha and the Mary in John are Mary Magdalene, sister to Lazarus and resident of Bethany. Remind participants that Lesson 1 focused on the resilience of Mary Magdalene, and Lesson 2 focuses on the resilience of Mary of “a certain village” in the Gospel of Luke.

Read aloud Luke 10:38–42.

(5 minutes) To clarify the details of the story, ask

1. What did Martha do when Jesus came to her village?
2. What did Mary do?
3. What was Martha's complaint? What did she ask Jesus to do about it?
4. In Jesus' response to Martha, what concerned him about her request?
5. What do you understand to be the “better part” Mary has chosen?
6. What do you understand will not be taken away from Mary?

(15–20 minutes) To probe for meaning, choose one or two questions for use in the whole group and one or two for use in pairs or triads.

1. Wonder together about what exactly Mary is choosing by sitting and listening at Jesus' feet. What might Mary be demonstrating to Jesus by her actions?
2. What do you imagine Mary hears and sees in Jesus that leads her to be his disciple? How might Mary's actions build resilience?
3. How do you imagine Mary living out her choice to follow Jesus?
4. Notice that Jesus does not admonish Martha for choosing serving over listening. Instead, Jesus points out to Martha that she is “worried and distracted by many things.” Why might worry and distraction be an obstacle to discipleship?

5. In what you have heard and seen of Jesus, what most compels you to be a follower of Jesus, the Christ? What do you hear that might build your own resilience?

### **Commune and Commit**

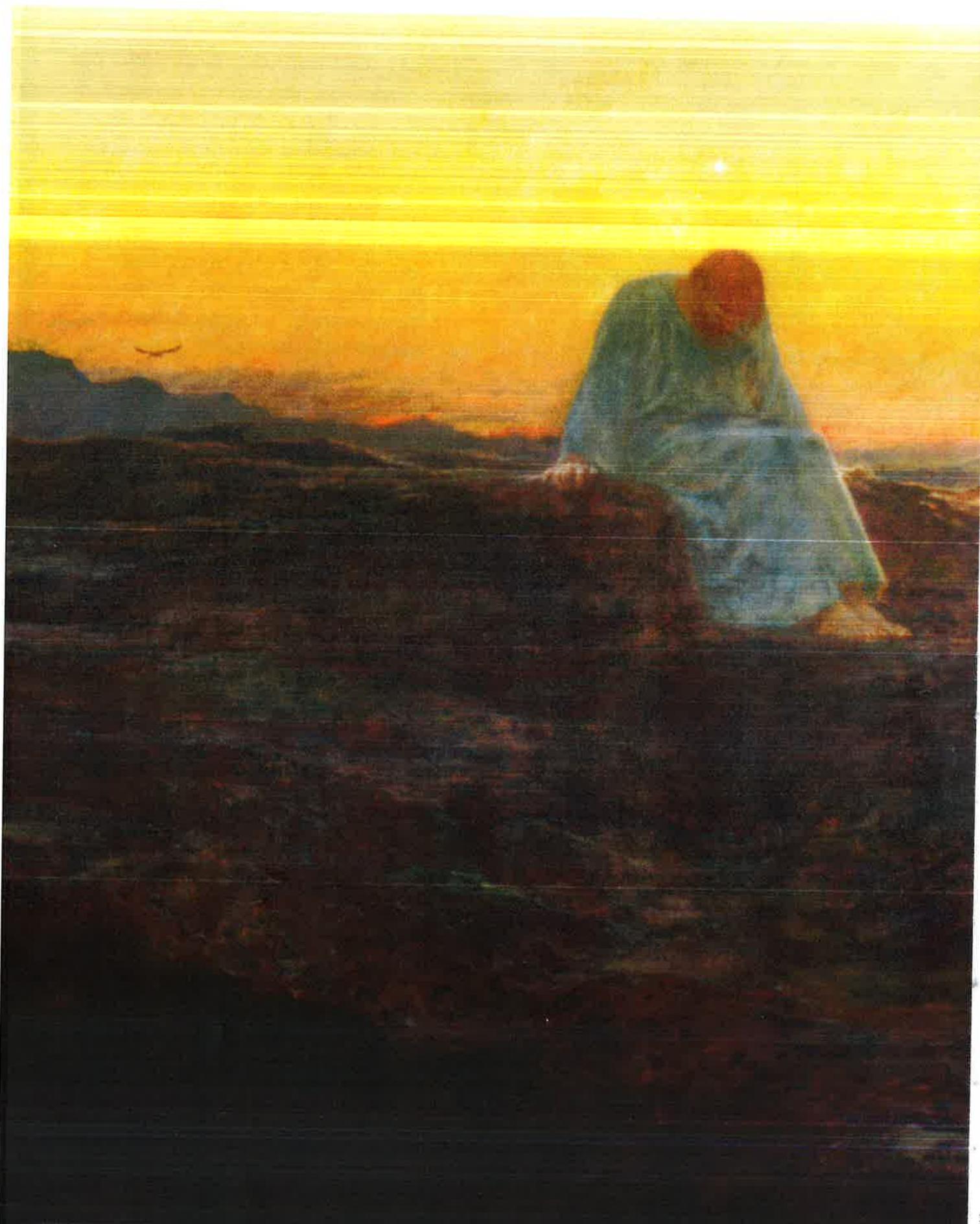
(20 minutes) We all need concrete ideas for claiming and growing resilience in our lives as followers of Jesus. The author's closing prayer contains the words, "Help us to learn that it is never too late to seek and receive your renewing Spirit and to be sent out for service and witness in the world." Sometimes we forget, or neglect, to listen actively for the Holy Spirit, the voice of God, and of Jesus, for all disciples. In "The Voice Inside Us All: An Invitation to Listen to the Holy Spirit" from the September/October 2024 issue of *Horizons* magazine, Rachel Whaley Doll reflects on how she nurtures the still small voice of God, and her ideas that might help us. Direct participants to the list below or create a larger handout. Invite them to look through this list created from Rachel's article and consider the following in silence.

What might add to your own work to build resilience for facing the many challenges that come your way? Select one to try as a new or renewed practice in the coming days.

- Pay attention to what you see and hear in the world around you. Intentionally listen often and with curiosity. God's Spirit speaks in a still, small voice. Signs are always pointing in the right direction if you pause to notice them.
- Rely on learning scripture by heart as an important point of connection between yourself and the Spirit. Notice the associations that bubble up as you read.
- Storytelling is a powerful link between God's Spirit and a follower of Jesus. Where might you listen to stories, or better yet, volunteer to tell them?

- Connection with God's Spirit happens in silence and in quiet conversation, but if that is not your style, it also happens "in unexpected and untraditional places" like small groups, church dinners, Bible studies, book groups, intergenerational retreats, deep conversations with friends, encounters while serving others.
- Besides telling us things, the Holy Spirit likes to show things to us. Rachel writes, "The Spirit knows I'm too scared to make any grand or sudden moves, so it's not uncommon for me to discover the Spirit has been shifting me (or things around me) in small degrees or a different direction." Hindsight is a great teacher. Notice small steps that can help you take more courageous and larger steps toward resilience.
- When you feel a connection to the Spirit, notice where your heart is. We hear the Spirit speak, "when we are vulnerable, when our hearts and minds are open, when we are curious."

Close with the lesson's Closing Prayer. Invite the participants to name the practice they chose after the words, "seek and receive your renewing Spirit." End with, "Send us out for service and witness in the world," and the last line of the prayer.



*The Temptation in the Wilderness, Briton Rivi re*