

Sermon for Proper 11C
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Have you ever been hungry for a **word**? That seems like an odd question, doesn't it? But if you think about it, I imagine your answer would be, "Yes." Maybe you interviewed for a job that you deeply desired, and in the time following, you so craved to hear the words, "We're offering you the position" that it was like a physical pang. Or maybe you have caused harm to another and realizing it, felt terrible. You apologized, but didn't know whether you would hear the words, "I forgive you"—you hungered for those words that could restore relationship. There are many other ways we may hunger for a word. My friend Melana is rector of a church in Maryland that is being sued by a shopping center owner. The church has an easement agreement with the shopping center that allows them to have 25 parking spaces—but the owner wants to invalidate the agreement and so is suing the church. The case goes to trial next week, and my friend is hoping and praying to hear the words that the jury has ruled in favor of the church.

In the lesson from Amos, the prophet conveys God's displeasure with the powerful people in the northern kingdom of Israel. God calls out the greedy, who are impatient to finish with the Sabbath and religious days, so they can go back to their cheating money-making schemes. Death and destruction are coming as a result. And one notable result will be a famine, not of food, but of the Word of the Lord. "People will stagger from sea to sea and wander from border to border searching for the word of the LORD, but they will not find it."

What does it mean, to hunger for the word of the Lord? We may also find clues in the Psalm. Psalm 52, not one of the most well-known or popular psalms, seems very appropriate in these times. It rails against those whose words are contrary to God: "You tyrant, why do you boast of wickedness against the godly all day long? You plot ruin; your tongue is like a sharpened razor . . . You love evil more than good and lying more than speaking the truth. You love all words that hurt, O you deceitful tongue." We have heard many discouraging and confusing words of late, often coming from or relating to people in power. The hearings on the January 6th Capitol attack continue, showing us that our democracy is perhaps much more fragile than we imagined. In the time since my granddaughter has been alive (just over 3 weeks), the Supreme Court has voided Roe v Wade, setting abortion rights back 50 years, relaxed concealed gun laws, and limited the power of the EPA to regulate greenhouse gases which are causes global warming. Welcome into the world, baby Quinn!

One article ("What the Supreme Court's Stunning Rulings Mean for Your Health," Emily Barone, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/what-the-supreme-courts-stunning-rulings-mean-for-your-health/ar-AAZxE0o>) looks at estimated health effects of these rulings. More smokestack emissions from power plants will lead to more extreme heat, which can lead to death and exacerbated dementia, heart and lung problems. They will also cause more pollution and

childhood asthma, especially among communities of color and poorer communities. Relaxed gun carry laws have been documented to lead to a rise in gun-related deaths; a 2022 paper showed that cities that permitted concealed gun carrying had nearly a 30% increase in firearm-related crime. And of course, without safe and legal access to abortion, more women will die in pregnancy and child-birth, even before you factor in the many women who will suffer and die from illegal abortions. This burden will be especially heavy on Black women and poor women. These are hard words to hear. Words I don't want to hear and don't want for my grandchild, for my community and country.

We hunger for Good words, good news. The story of Mary and Martha is not about shaming people who do stuff. My responsible older sister always gets ticked off by this story. As do most of the responsible older sister people in the congregations I have served. "Well, SOMEBODY has to clean and serve dinner!" they say, indignantly. Jesus isn't shaming Martha and he's not showing preference for Mary. He's offering Martha an invitation. An invitation to get down off her high horse and recognize her own inner hunger, hunger for the Word that calms, heals, directs, renews, speaks truth, stands up for right, advocates for justice. In his "coming out speech" in Luke 4, Jesus quotes Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for God has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor, to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the Lord's favor has come." Jesus brings the words that we hunger for; Jesus IS the Word that we hunger for.

Even Martha has this hunger. Even we do.

What in this time of Bad News and crazy politics is the Word that we hunger for? I found one such word in a strange place. In a video about starlings. In this tiktok video, Alexis Rockley says, "We're going to start with birds and we're going to end with hope!" She begins with pointing out how beautiful starlings are with their iridescent feathers. Then she talks about how starlings move in great, high-speed flocks in perfect unison, a motion that scientists named "murmuration." They are like waves flowing and turning in the sky. Scientists have tried to figure out why and how they do this, and studied them for 10 years. What did they find out?

As Alexis says, "Starlings move in liquid unison with each other by only paying attention to the seven birds closest to them. That's it. Just their seven bird friends." She continues, "Here's the hope part. You are a starling, my love. You were never meant to fly alone. We starlings are surrounded by predators, animals who have decided that our destruction is in their best interest." She says that the "predators" want us to think that we are alone, and can't solve anything or resist anything. And we fall into the trap of deciding that the problems are too big and we are too small to do anything. And truly, don't have enough resources to deal with everyone. She continues, "But the seven birds closest to you—your community? Now THAT you have resources for. Look away from the predators and focus on your birdy neighbors." She says we should support and communicate and build trust and organize with our birdy neighbors, so that we can outwit and outfly the predators and also engage in this life-giving dance of murmuration.

Now that's good news! The Gospel invites us into the place where God dwells, where the powerful Word gives us hope and community and a way to dance even as we confront evil and injustice.

Don't you hunger for that Word? Try on the word "starling." What would happen if you were to concentrate your energies, not on every relationship, but on your seven closest relationships, the ones that give you life and feed your soul and spark creativity and nurture joy? Sure, you can and probably do have other relationships, but what if the greatest part of your time and energy went into flying and supporting and dancing with these people?

Jesus invites us into dancing flight, not into duty and drudgery. I think that is what the BTS program is inviting us into as a church—imaginative dance, choosing joy, nurturing the relationships that sustain us and expand us into our full, Christ-filled selves. What do you think? Ready to be a starling?

Let us pray. Amen.