

One series, above all others, has taken Netflix by storm the past month. The timing was perfect for its release. Right before Christmas allowed time for people to binge watch the series over the holidays. This series is entitled “Making a Murder.” It has captivated individuals from every facet of life to learn about Steven Avery in this first season. I’m not going to give any spoilers away, so don’t worry if you haven’t seen it. Very briefly I’ll note that Steven Avery was formerly convicted of sexual assault in 1985. 18 years later he was released when DNA evidence linked the assault to another man. As a result, Steven decides to file a lawsuit against the county associated with his prison sentence. Shortly after this lawsuit was filed, Steven was accused of a murder. The series goes through his court trial for the murder, and at times it’s hard to figure out whose voice to listen to. Do we listen to the Steven? What about the state prosecutor? How about Steven’s family? Can the police even be trusted? Is the media spinning inaccuracies? Can we trust the

children? There are so many angles, so many possibilities, and so many voices.

The many voices in today's appointed Bible readings also caught my attention. In the gospel reading we hear voices question if John is the Messiah. We hear John respond, and he directs people to a more powerful person who is to come. And then there's also the memorable voice from heaven.

Luke's story of Jesus's baptism is unique in comparison with every other Gospel in our canon. In Matthew, Mark, and John, we hear that Jesus rises from the water in front of a crowd. Those gathered hear a voice from heaven and see the Spirit descend. However, in today's reading from Luke this isn't the case.

Here in Luke Jesus is just like everyone else in his actual baptism. I can imagine a line of numerous people waiting to get baptized.

Everyone gets baptized, including Jesus. All are baptized with the knowledge that they are from a sinful system and born into a world of systemic sin. Here we see Jesus understanding the full implication of the incarnation. For at Jesus's baptism he acknowledges the world's tragic structures. For in this world, and arguably in "Making a Murder," the system takes hold. As one theologian puts it, "There are no innocent, no perfect, no unambiguous, no controllable, indeed no sinless choices in this world. All choices must be made within a context of a system that precedes and impinges upon [sinful choices]."¹ In other words, everything and everyone is caught up in an imperfect structure and therefore cannot make anything but a sinful choice, period.

Into this sinful system Jesus is baptized, and he's acknowledging this pretty darn crappy world with his baptism. Yet here in Luke there is more than just baptism with water, there's something else. Here

¹ Hess, Carol Lakey. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word. Year C, Volume 1.* "Baptism of Our Lord (First Sunday after the Epiphany): Theological Perspective. p, 236-240.

Luke differs from all the other gospels - did you catch it? In Luke, Jesus prays. This action, prayer, makes a monumental shift in Luke. For Luke the epiphany is not in the act of being baptized. Rather the epiphany, or the moment of insight or the “aaha!” moment, this epiphany is connected to the practice of prayer.²

Why does that get me so excited? Why in the world does that little difference matter in Luke? Well, Luke is connecting things that are larger than baptism. Luke intertwines Jesus’s baptism and prayer. And the descending of the Spirit is what comes with the prayer. And prayer is a big deal in Luke. We know that Jesus prays before he calls his disciples (6:12), he prays before asking them who he is (9:18), he prays at the time of his transfiguration (9:29), he prays before teaching his disciples how to pray (11:1), he prays on the night of his arrest (22:41), and prays at his death (23:46). For Luke, what is characteristic of Jesus will also be characteristic of the church in

² Hess, Ernest. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word. Year C, Volume 1.* “Baptism of Our Lord (First Sunday after the Epiphany): Homiletical Perspective. p, 237-241.

Acts. And scholars know that Luke and Acts are written by the same author. In Acts, we'll read that the church prays while waiting for the promised coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8,15). And after the promised Spirit comes upon them at Pentecost they continue the regular practice of prayer. So, you see, what has begun at Jesus's baptism is now lived out today through the practice of prayer by which we receive the Holy Spirit.³

Prayer is a crucial link in Luke. Prayer is also an important focus in both Luke and Acts. Prayer is what connects us all the way back to Jesus's baptism today. Prayer, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Spirit – these are three things we experience in baptism. Prayer is that moment of self-reflection. Prayer is centering ourselves in God and the world. Prayer is the Christian equivalent of mindfulness meditation. Prayer is a moment where we speak *and* where we

³ Hess, Ernest. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word. Year C, Volume 1*. "Baptism of Our Lord (First Sunday after the Epiphany): Homiletical Perspective. p, 237-241.

listen; where we listen, metaphorically or literally, to the only voice that matters. After Jesus prays he hears a voice say, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” After prayer is when Jesus is given the strength to fulfill his vocation. Prayer is that moment where we can turn off that negative self-talk to be reminded that God’s voice speaks the truth. Prayer is that moment, where we are assured that nothing can separate us from God’s love. Prayer is when we tell those voices in our head to shut up already, for God’s voice says, “*you - you* are my child. I am proud of *you*.”

This is the life-sustaining message our God brings to us each day. Yet, we know that our world is complicated and filled with many voices. There’s that confident but questionably unethical voice at work. There’s his soft-spoken yet controlling demeanor. There’s her hilarious and offensive voice. Even our heads are filled with disastrous voices. We hear that we’re too fat, too skinny, too old, too young, too gay, too straight, too white, too black, too stupid, too

smart, too much to handle, or “too simple” to understand. The systems of our world also catch us in our tracks, betray our trust, expect too much, or simply don’t give a damn.

So how do we come to hear the voice of God more clearly? First we have to train ourselves to recognize the voice of God. It’s much like training and preparing before we run a marathon. So too before we can recognize God’s voice we must prepare and train our ears, our mind, and ourselves to hear God’s voice. We train ourselves by first looking to the source of God’s voice through the ages – the scriptures. We come to church to hear God’s voice. We study the scriptures in meetings, in bible study, and on our own. We come to immerse ourselves in God’s voice so that we can go off and recognize God’s voice in the world.

In our readings today we get those consistent and clear glimpses of God’s voice. In Isaiah, God’s voice says, do not fear, I have redeemed

you. You are mine. There's *nothing* you need to do. I love *you*. I *am* with you. Do not fear. In the Psalm, we hear the voice of the Lord give a blessing of peace. In Acts the Spirit comes in that holy moment of laying-on-of-the-hands. In Luke, God's voice says, "I'm proud of you." Today we're reminded of God's voice with us.

Friends, it's easy to be confused by the many voices in the world. We wonder, "What voice should we listen to?" Today we're reminded that God's voice echoes clear – *you* are loved, *God* is in control, and *nothing* can separate you from God's love. Though the many voices swirl and though the systems of this world are corrupt and unjust, we come in prayer-filled mindfulness. We receive the free gift of the Spirit. We are liberated from self-doubt. With our liberation we are sent to be God's love and to share God's love to the world. Friends, clear the voices from your head this day. Hear of God's love. Then go and be God's love in this world. Amen.