

Wednesday, March 12: Ah, Holy Jesus

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<https://open.spotify.com/track/5ypLmgUH5py6ebEFDYprEG?si=bcd9540bf4644f20>

On April 21st, 2018, Sufjan Stevens was the guest musician on the too-short-lived NPR show “Live From Here” which was hosted by the musician Chris Thile. During the broadcast Stevens performed some of his songs including *Heirloom* and *Mystery of Love*. But at the end of the show, Chris Thile shared that they would conclude with a hymn. Thile made a passing remark about how both he and Steven grew up with hymns but they would be singing one that was previously unfamiliar to Thile.

Stevens said, “This was a hymn we used to sing in the United Methodist Church. And I was struck by it as a kid because it’s actually really dark and gloomy. And I don’t think Methodists are usually so dark and gloomy...”

As a Methodist, I agree with Stevens that we are not the dark and gloomy type. But maybe we should be. After all, the hymn requires an acknowledgment that we, even the Methodists, are part of the ungodly for whom Christ died.

Stanley Hauerwas notes that Lent is “A dangerous time for Christians. This time in the church year, I fear, tempts us to play at being Christian. We are to discipline our lives during Lent in order to discover and repent of those sins that prevent us from the wholehearted worship of God. That is a perfectly appropriate ambition, but we are not very good at it. We are not very good at it because, in general, we are not very impressive sinners. Just as most of us are mediocre Christians, so we are mediocre sinners. As a result, Lent becomes a time we get to play at being sinners while continuing to entertain the presumption that we are not all that bad... I am not suggesting that Lenten disciplines do not have a place. Giving up something we will miss may help us discover forms of self-centeredness that make us less than Christ has made possible. But, hopefully, we will find ways to avoid playing at being sinful. Lent is not a time to play at anything but rather a time to confess that we would have shouted ‘Crucify him!’”

Ah, Holy Jesus whether performed by the indie-darling Sufjan Stevens on a Public Radio Broadcast or offered by a sleepy congregation on a Sunday morning is no easy hymn to sing. With its minor key and challenging melodic line, it’s already difficult enough before considering the staggering lyrics:

“Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee? Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee!
’Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee; I crucified thee!”

Dark and gloomy indeed.

And yet, Lent is not a time to play - it's a time to be honest. To quote the Book of Common Prayer, "We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offered against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders."

It takes a lot of courage to pray those words just as it takes a lot of courage to sing the words of *Ah, Holy Jesus*. But it is good and right for us to do so because it is precisely people like us to whom Christ imparts these words from the cross: "Father forgive them, they do not know what they are doing."

Ah, Holy Jesus reminds us, as Martin Luther said, "God receives none but those who are forsaken, restores health to none but those who are sick, gives sight to none but the blind, and life to none but the dead. He does not give saintliness to any but sinners, nor wisdom to any but fools. In short: God has mercy on none but the wretched and gives grace to none but those who are in disgrace."

Thanks be to God.