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| The Hope of the Gospelby The Rev. Dr. S. Dean TurbevilleApril 13, 1995, Maundy ThursdayFirst Presbyterian Church, Hendersonville, North CarolinaText: I Kings 1: 49-53Then all the guests of Adonijah trembled, and rose, and each went his own way. And Adonijah feared Solomon; and he arose, and went, and caught hold of the horns of the altar. And it was told Solomon, "Behold, Adonijah fears King Solomon; for lo, he has laid hold of the horns of the altar, saying, 'Let King Solomon swear to me first that he will not slay his servant with the sword.' " And Solomon, said, "If he prove to be a worthy man, not one of his hairs shall fall to the earth; but if wickedness is found in him, he shall die." So King Solomon sent, and they brought him down from the altar. And he came and did obeisance to King Solomon; and Solomon said to him, "Go to your house."The Apostle Paul wrote of his personal outlook on life: "God forbid that I should glory, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." With regard to his Gospel preaching he wrote: "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." The great purpose of the church communion service, or the Lord's Supper, instituted by the Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed, is that we should remember "the Lord's death until he comes." In the same way that the cross is often hung in a central location in our church sanctuaries, so the cross is radically central to Christianity itself.Like all worship services, tonight's service is for the spiritual renewal and revival of the church. And these passages I just read really clarify it all for us, don't they? There can be no renewal of the church, and no revival of the people's heart for God, and no one converted from unbelief to saving faith, except directly through the cross of Jesus. The Bible says it is through this "narrow gate" that we must enter in.So once and for all, let's forget about renewing the church through clever programming and demographic studies; let's forget about renewing the church through good deed doing and moral busyness; let's forget about trying to bring new life through customizing the Gospel to meet every conceivable psychological and social need people say they have; let's forget about bringing revival through clever entertainment and winsome preacher personalities. It is much simpler than that, and much more profound. Let us turn to God's one great peace offering, offered once for all his people. Tonight, with a moral seriousness and a soul-felt gravity that we may never have risked before in church, let us each one turn to Jesus Christ on his cross, and deal once and for all with what this really means.Friends, I cannot save you tonight; I cannot revive you; I cannot renew you this evening. It's not within my power at all, even as it pertains to myself. But if the Holy Spirit of God turns your and my heart and mind to the Suffering Servant, even Jesus our Lord, and we are led to lay hold on him by simple faith and with fresh feeling and deeper devotion, then there will be cause to mark this very night on the calendar of eternity, and angels will sing in the courts of our King about what happens here and now, in this place tonight.You know I've really got my work cut out for me with this focus on the cross. Recently a pastor surveyed a hundred members of various churches in his town about the significance of the cross. This is the question he asked: "Would it make any difference in your life if Christ had not died on the cross?" Would it make any difference in your life if Christ had not died on the cross? Remember now, he asked this question of church members. Here are the results: forty-five out of the one hundred said they didn't think it would make any difference. Twenty-five said they thought so, but when they were asked what the difference would be, they weren't sure. Twenty said it made all the difference in how they lived and believed. Ten said they didn't know, because they didn't understand what the cross was all about.Did you hear that now? Only twenty percent of church going people said the cross made all the difference in how they lived and believed. Twenty percent! What percentage are you in tonight? Do you really know clearly what it means that Jesus has died for your sins and mine, and that he was raised for our justification? We had a member join our church a few Sundays ago who said that in all her growing up years in the Presbyterian Church she had always heard that Jesus died for the sins of mankind. It was in another denomination that she was finally told he had died for her sins particularly. Her sins. He died for her!You know, many of us in the church suffer from a kind of over-familiarity with the cross. Like a song on the radio whose melody we can't get out of our head, but whose words we can't remember either, we know the cross well and yet we don't know it. We are familiar with it without understanding it at all.To lead us to understanding, and to break us of this false familiarity, I am not going to focus on the familiar "John 3:16" type passages. Instead, I want us to turn back in our Bibles. Back, back before Jesus came, back in the early days of the kings of Israel. Back to an ambitious Hebrew man, a son of King David named Adonijah. You see, I agree with the Puritans and the great reformers of the church who said that the Old Testament is replete with "types and shadows" of what was to come in fullness in the New Testament. The Old Testament, in a way that was quite supernaturally arranged, is all about Jesus and his cross. In fact, you cannot fully embrace the Savior and his work without a basic grasp of the Old Testament moral law, and the sacrifices and the prophecies.And so we turn now to that Old Testament, to Adonijah, David's ambitious son, who wants to be the next king at any cost, even the cost of starting an insurrection against his dying father. When he realizes in one crushing moment that not only has his plot been found out but that power has shifted totally over to Solomon, another one of David's sons, Adonijah feels the noose tightening around his neck; he knows his days may be numbered, and he does something then that we need to look very closely at tonight. Adonijah went straight to the Tent of Meeting and took hold of the horns of the altar.The horns of the altar were four vertical projections at each corner of the altar. In keeping with the law of Moses, the priest smeared the blood of the sacrificial bull or sheep on the horns during the sacrificial ritual and poured the rest of the blood at the base of the altar itself. The idea of seeking asylum like this is rooted in the Old Testament books of Exodus and Leviticus; indeed there were special "cities of refuge" where a person could flee under certain dire circumstances. Adonijah chooses to flee to the most holy place of all, to the altar of sacrifice, where the sin-offering had been made to God for the sins of the people.In running to that place, in grasping those horns still sticky with the blood of sacrifice, the desperate Adonijah is trying to place his own destiny under the protection of God. He wants a covering of atoning grace and forgiveness for his murderous plotting, and there's only one place to find it: the place of sacrifice, the sanctuary of God's grace.Whatever else we may say about old Adonijah, we can at least give the guy this credit: he knew he was guilty. He didn't hire a high-powered defense team to look for legal loopholes. He didn't blame his actions on some psychological syndrome which came from a bad childhood. He didn't try to say what he had done wasn't all that bad. Adonijah knew that he was guilty of treason against his king and his father.And friends, before the cross can mean anything to us, we must see that we are, too. Guilty, that is. Guilty of treason against our King and our Father Because in the beginning, like Adonijah, we lived in the royal house. We were created in the King's own holy image. In the beginning, we were in his household, by rights happy and holy sons and daughters of the Creator of everything. And our fall in sin was not a mere mistake, not a mere error. Sin is treason. Treason against our own Father. Treason against our own King. And what is the nature of this treason? If you and I look at God's law in the ten commandments, I know that even if I have not broken the letter of every commandment, I have broken the spirit of every single one of them. And you have, too.And even more terrifying to sinners is the New Testament commandment to love. Tonight we are observing that evening in the church year with the odd name, "Maundy Thursday." The word "Maundy" comes from the Latin word mandatum,which means "commandment" or "mandate." At the last Supper, on the Thursday night before he died, Jesus gave us a new commandment, a new mandate. He said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." Now is there anyone here tonight who has ever loved your fellow church members even for a moment as well as Jesus has loved you for all eternity? Would you just raise your hand if you think you have?... Not one. Not one, and that's an honest answer. We have broken every commandment, and the new mandate from the Lord Jesus as well. If we for one moment understood the holiness and moral majesty of our God, our sin would terrify us more than anything else in the world. We don't understand the cross because we don't understand who God is in his holiness. Adonijah, on the other hand, understood the dire seriousness of his situation and in a holy hurry he flew to the altar.Where is that kind of earnestness today in our religion? I am struck by the sheer lightness of our Christianity, aren't you? Where is the sense of what the medieval saints called the "tremendum mysterium," the "tremendous mystery" of God? Where is the seriousness about heaven and hell? Where in the American church is the full weight of God's glory sensed? Where is the gravity of our spiritual situation expressed today in our chatty and jokey worship services? In many churches today more time is spent on weekly announcements than in prayer before God.A few years ago I was reminded of the seriousness of the real issues of life and faith from a most unexpected source. I got a phone call one afternoon at the church office. It was a voice I had never heard before, the barely audible voice of a teenage girl who had found the church office number in the phone book. She said she had one question she just had to have answered. Her grandfather, who was a preacher, had said something that had made her wonder, and what she had to know was this: She asked me, "Can a murderer inherit the kingdom of God?"It's not every day one gets such a question. I asked her to come in to talk, and she agreed. She arrived soon after. She was no more than 16, clearly depressed, her eyes hardly ever leaving the floor. In a whisper, she told me of her 30-year old uncle who had impregnated her. When her "relationship" with this man had turned sour, she had tried to abort the unborn child herself. Her action had caused great bleeding, and she was rushed to the hospital, where she delivered a tiny boy. Her son lived for a few minutes in her arms before he died. In those few minutes, she loved him. And now she wanted to know: can a murderer inherit the kingdom of God?Let me say that while I did my best to lead her to the grace and forgiveness of Jesus Christ, I don't know what finally happened to that young girl; though I tried to follow up with her, I never saw her again. But I know this: pitiful as she is, she is closer to the kingdom of God than many, many self-confident and blissfully self-reliant ones who warm the pews of our churches every Sunday. For like Adonijah, she at least knew the gravity of her situation. She knew that the question which really counts is the question of a guilty one entering the Kingdom of God. And she made no excuses for herself, not one.We must all come to that point of making no more excuses, no more vain protests of our innocence before God. Like Adonijah, we must become desperate enough to place our whole destiny under the grace and protection of God, crying out like the psalmist, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion, blot out my transgression... For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me." Have you ever in your life prayed such a prayer? Has your sin and God's holiness ever loomed before you like that? Blessed are you who have been tormented in that way! Adonijah was tormented too, and so he took hold of the horns of the altar with great force: the Bible says he clung to it.Coming to Christ is not a tiptoe through the tulips. Though the first understanding of Gospel truth may come as gently as the dawn, true repentance is in the end a desperate, wrenching act of re-orienting ourselves to God's will and his all-sufficient grace. Do you remember that Jesus said, "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it." There is a forcefulness, an earnestness, a desperateness to true repentant faith.This sermon is entitled, "The Hope of the Gospel." Beloved, we have advantages over Adonijah when it comes to hoping. We have the hope of the Gospel. Adonijah had to hope for mercy from a mere earthly king. And later in the story, he is finally executed by King Solomon. And furthermore, Adonijah could only hope that his sins were covered by an animal sacrificed at an altar.We are so much more blessed. Prophets and rulers longed to see what we have seen and did not see it. For we have seen a better king and a better sacrifice. Our King and Father is full of grace and light and generosity. His own Word says he is slow to anger. And before we were born, before the world even existed, he foresaw our entire need, and in mercy beyond our understanding he sent his blessed Son to be the sin-bearer for us. Jesus became sin for you and me on the cross.Will you accept that in your mind and heart tonight? You see, there has been only one ultimate question in your life all along, as there has been only one question in all human history: "How will sinful humankind ever approach a holy God?" It is like asking, how could a hummingbird fly into a blast furnace? How can a minnow swim up the Niagara Falls? How can a murderer inherit the kingdom of God? How can we ever go home to our Father now, after what has happened? Jesus heard the great question. And in royal majesty he answered, "over my dead body." Yes, we have a better king, and we have a better sacrifice.The difference between the sacrifice in the Old Testament and that of the New, is that in the former case the sheep died for the shepherd, but in the latter case the Shepherd died for the sheep. The first letter from John says that Jesus' dying was the "propitiation" for our sins. That long word simply means that he turned aside the just anger of God against us. He redirected it away from us and toward himself. In Jesus the only God-man hanging on the cross, God himself was standing in for us, offering up a perfect sacrifice only a perfect God could offer, bearing the penalty we all deserved. And God is fully satisfied with the sacrifice he offered.The cross may mean a great deal to us, but in the end it is what it means to God that matters most. God is now reconciled, God is now at peace with all those rebels who seek asylum and sanctuary in him, clinging to the cross alone for our merit and justification. And as it is written in the holy Word, through this one act, God the Almighty One, has opened up a new and living way to himself, a way dependent not on our goodness, but on his goodness, not on our faithfulness, but his faithfulness. (Hallelujah!) And all who would come may now come.And why would you not? Why would you not come to Christ tonight? For when we come to him in honest desperation, when, like Adonijah, we come in a holy hurry, making no more excuses for ourselves but throwing ourselves wholly on his mercy, for Jesus' sake he accepts us, not reluctantly, not begrudgingly, but as his beloved children, as his dear ones, once lost but now found again, once guilty but now innocent again, once dead but now alive again, and all precious in his sight, every one.And so it all comes down to this, folks: in all the universe, there is but one altar, and one sacrifice, and one refuge, and one Savior whom God has given for us to cling to. Clinging only to him, we live forever. Rejecting him,we perish...forever. And those are the only two options there are. What are you clinging to tonight? What are you leaning on right now in your life? The great writer Walker Percy once said, "What a tragedy it will be for many people who have climbed up the ladder of life, only to find, in the end, that the top of their ladder was leaning against the wrong wall."If the ladder of your life is leaning against anything other than Jesus the Lord, and what he has done for you on the cross, then it is like leaning against a crumbling wall or a rotten fence, and it will crash, and you will crash with it.Are you leaning on your heritage tonight, your family and cultural or racial identity in this Southern town? In the end all that will crash, and you will crash with it.Are you leaning on your intellect this evening? You may indeed be very smart or clever, but finally that will crash, and you will crash with it.Are you leaning on your looks, your beauty, your athletic abilities? It will not be long and those will crash, and you will crash with it.Are you leaning on your wealth, your financial investments for your security? They will crash, and you will crash with it.Are you leaning on your reputation, your friends, even your spouse? That will crash, and you will crash with it.Are you leaning on your own goodness to see you through tonight? Are you leaning on your idea that you're about as good or better than most people? God's prophet Isaiah said our very best goodness is but filthy rags compared to the holiness of the Lord. That so-called goodness will crash, and you will crash with it. For he is coming to judge the living and the dead, and the earth will melt at his arrival. There is an accounting coming.If your life is leaning on anything or anyone else than Jesus Christ tonight, then you are desperately, terribly lost. We all know the odd fact that many men and women hear the Gospel every week but remain quite unconverted. For the Lord will not divide his solitary throne with the favorite sins they refuse to cast out. Oh, drop everything else, and like Adonijah taking hold of the altar, take hold of him!Ever since I was a little boy (I have never told this before to my congregation, but) ever since I was a little boy, in dreams I knew that God would have me speak. For years I thought it was my own words I would speak. But I was wrong. It was God's Word. And God's Word to those he loves, God's gracious Word for you this evening, is run for your lives. Run for your lives into the sanctuary of his grace and love. Run for your lives to Jesus Christ, and by faith alone lay hold of him, and rest in him forever. For he says, "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, (all you who work so hard and are worn out), come to me and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Come to him. Take this broken bread and this cup poured out for you. And now, by faith, lay hold of Jesus Christ, as he calls you forever to himself. Amen.The Rev. Dr. S. Dean Turbeville is pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, Hendersonville, North Carolina. |

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