

TEXT: Jeremiah 9.23-26; John 14.1-14

DATE: January 6th, 2002

SERMON TITLE: "Get Closer" New Year 2

Jeremiah 9:23-26

23 Thus says the LORD: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; 24 but let those who boast, boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the LORD; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the LORD.

25 The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will attend to all those who are circumcised only in the foreskin: 26 Egypt, Judah, Edom, the Ammonites, Moab, and all those with shaven temples who live in the desert. For all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart. 1

I. Introduction.

"It's a dog!" Chelsea said firmly.

"It is not. It's a coyote!" Linda said, sounding like mothers everywhere speaking to preteen daughters.

"A coyote wouldn't just lie there on the ice sleeping mom," said Chelsea impatiently.

"It's that dog that the neighbors said their friends lost a couple of days ago while visiting with them.

Dad, what do you think it is?"

I had just innocently walked into the kitchen to graze a little and suddenly found a pair of binoculars thrust into my face.

1The New Revised Standard Version, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.

Chelsea pointed to a dark looking object lying on the ice on the opposite side of the lake.

I applied the binoculars and peered carefully.

I fiddled with the focus and peered again.

“Well, what is it?” asked Chelsea.

“It’s dead,” I said, trying to sound as knowledgeable as I could.

“It is not!” snorted both Linda and Chelsea with disgust.

“It keeps raising its head and looking around,” said Linda.

“Yea!” said Chelsea, “Its keeps raising its head and looking around.”

I had done it again, walked right into an ambush and was now getting it in both ears.

By this stage in life I should know that whenever I stumble between mother and daughter in the midst of any kind of disagreement, I always become the one thing that they can agree upon, mostly that I am wrong.

I have come to know that I am really good at settling disagreements in our family, but I always forget and do it anyway.

Still squinting through the binoculars, I tried to figure a way out of the uncomfortable peacemaking position that I frequently stumble into.

“It’s a dog,” I said, fiddling with the focus.

“No, I thinks it is definitely a coyote,” more fiddling with the binoculars.

“No, I can see it now, it is unquestionably a dog,” moving to another window that does not have quite as much bird poop on it.

“No, it’s certainly a coyote,” more fiddling with the focus.

“Hey, it moved!”

“We told you so,” sung Linda and Chelsea in their best choral arrangement.

“But what is it?”

“It’s not dead,” I said.

“You are a quick study Hon,” said Linda.

“To bad you can’t see too good.”

Now that was a low blow.

I do not handle middle age well; neither do I plan on embracing old age with any grace at all.

The fact that I am someplace in between and loosing a good portion of my hair, chest, libido and eyesight does not bring me slightest bit of joy.

Sometimes I hate the truth, and the truth is, my old eyes are deteriorating faster than a road killed skunk in July.

Even with the aid of good binoculars, distant objects are not the joy to behold they once were.

I cautiously backed out of the kitchen discussion with what grace I could muster.

Eventually I went down stairs and strapped on my cross-country skis.

There was only one thing to do, get a closer look.

Chelsea joined me and together we trudged across the lake on our skis towards whatever it was, lying in a heap in the snow on the other side.

We kept behind a little Island so that the animal would not hear or see us until we were quite close.

Then at the last minute, we skied out from behind the island to solve the mystery.

It was a coyote, and it left as soon as it saw us.

Linda had guessed right right.

“Good thing I was wrong and it was not a dog,” said Chelsea, with her mother’s ability to never completely lose an argument.

“We would have had to take it in and that would have been just another mouth to feed.”

I continued to ski silently down the lake and think.

I thought about how you never really know much about anything or anyone until you get good and close.

As I skied and pondered this days case of coyote speculation, it struck me that I was the only one whose eyes were really bad and yet Linda and Chelsea with 20/20 vision really couldn’t see a whole lot better than I could, from a distance.

From a distance we were all guessing, hence the ski across the lake.

It does not really matter how good you think you are with seeing and knowing, distance is a problem.

We all had to get closer to really know.

II. The Text

That night, with the aid of a mug of tea and a little Mozart, I dragged the afternoon’s coyote speculation through scripture.

I had been pondering the two verses of Jeremiah where God says to His people: “*Let not the wise man gloat in his wisdom, or the mighty man in his might, or the rich man in his riches. Let them boast in this alone: that they truly know me...*” (Jeremiah 9.23-24) 2

The word “know” is what I pondered.

In Hebrew we see it a lot, it is the word (יָדָע).

We see it in a number of places, most notably in God’s call to Jeremiah as a prophet, where God says to Jeremiah, *Before I formed you in the womb I knew you. (Jer. 1.5) 3,*

2Holy Bible, New Living Translation, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.) 1996.
3The New Revised Standard Version, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.

Obviously, the Hebrew word “know” (יָדָע) means far more than intellectual knowledge.⁴

It has this sense of knowing so completely that it is almost at the pre-cellular level

Also, the word “know” or (יָדָע) was used in biblical Hebrew to describe the intimate relations experienced by a husband and wife (as in Gen.4.1).

It conveyed the sense of a close personal and intimate relationship ... “like the two becoming one” in marriage.

In Jeremiah 9.24 God says to his people, *‘The only thing that is noteworthy or worth boasting about is knowing me in a close, personal and intimate way ... becoming one with me ... like I know you in Jesus Emanuel.’*

God says, *‘You may have human wisdom beyond Solomon, but that is not worth boasting about.’*

God says, *‘You may have human strength greater than Samson and that is not worth boasting about.’*

God says, *‘You may have worldly wealth greater than Nebuchadnezzar and that is not worth boasting about.’*

God says, *‘You should boast only to the extent that you understand and know Me ... have become one with Me, as I have become one with you in Jesus.’*

The only way to know God that way is to get close.

As I sat with tea and Mozart I thought about the things that hold me far away from God ... things that prevent me from getting close.

For me, human wisdom is like a pair of binoculars when it comes to God.

It encourages distant and cold objective viewing.

Regardless of if human wisdom is theological, philosophical, or ideological in nature, in my experience it just seems to hold me back from really knowing God intimately.

⁴Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc.) 1983, 1985.

The greatest theologian of the 20th century was probably Karl Barth.

When asked in a BBC interview near the end of his life to summarize what his greatest discovery was as a theologian, Karl thought for a moment and replied, *“Jesus loves me this I know, for the bible tells me so.”*

Karl never allowed his theology to get in the way of his close personal knowing of God through Christ, and neither should any of us.

Human strength has been little help for me in knowing God intimately.

Oddly enough, my times of really getting close with God have been when I am weakest.

My human strength seems to be like a wall that I almost have to crawl over to know God intimately.

Like the Psalmist, I have come to know the blessing in my times of infirmity ... I have come to know that it is good for me when I am afflicted for then I come to know Him and His ways (Ps. 119.71).

Like the Apostle I have come to know the grace in weakness ... I have come to know that when I am weak, then I know Him who is strong (1Corinthians12.9).

I have experienced the trite old saying. “trouble is a good keeper” as true with regards to knowing God.

Wealth has not helped much with getting closer to God and knowing Him more intimately, at least in my very limited experience with it.

I can't really say why I am always wishing for more of it.

Jesus said something like; it would be easier for a BMW to pass through a syringe, than for a rich person to enter the realm of God (Matthew 19.24).

On one hand, I think wealth is sort of like human strength, it just encourages a kind of pathetic self-sufficiency that holds one away from knowing God.

On the other hand, wealth seems to be just a huge distraction, and I don't handle distractions well.

Getting closer.

It is the only remedy I know of for truly getting to know anything or anyone.

It is what God wants me to do with regards to Him ... get closer to Him ... and to know Him intimately.

In knowing Him, we will know His character; *I am the LORD; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the LORD.* (Jer.9.24)⁵.

God's character as Lord is centered around His love, justice and righteousness.

The word translated "steadfast love" (𐤎𐤏𐤍𐤃𐤌𐤎𐤏𐤍) refers to God's loyal and active love (cf. 31:3; 33:11; Lam. 3:22).

God stands by His commitment to His people, no matter what.

God is active in his people's lives, at all times.

That is the nature of God's (𐤎𐤏𐤍𐤃𐤌𐤎𐤏𐤍) ... perfect in loyalty, faithfulness and always active in a person's life.

Knowing God does not mean experiencing some fleeting warm fuzzy feeling ... but rather it means coming to know God as one who is always loyal and always faithful with a love that is always perfect and always at work in your life.

In knowing God we will be experiencing the (𐤎𐤏𐤍𐤃𐤌𐤎𐤏𐤍) love of God as the Apostle describes it: *patient; kind; without envy or arrogance; never rude; never irritable or resentful; never rejoicing in wrong; always rejoicing in the truth; always strong enough to bear all things with us; always hopeful enough to endure all things with us; a Love that never ends.* (1 Cor. 13.5-8 paraphrase)⁶

⁵The New Revised Standard Version, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.

⁶The New Revised Standard Version, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.

Everything else will pass away, but God's steadfast love in action, His (אֱלֹהִים אֱמֶת), will never pass away said the Apostle (1Cor 13.).

Right now God is at work in your life with his perfect faithful and loyal love that will never end.

Knowing God intimately means knowing and experiencing God's "Justice" in our lives.

Justice is the Hebrew word (צְדָקָה).

It is a broad term that pointed to governing justly, truthfully and perfectly.

God vindicates the innocent and tends to the guilty.

God's justice tends to the needs of the victim with the healing truth that sets one free, even while dealing with the guilty.

Right now God is acting towards you with his healing Justice.

Knowing God means knowing and experiencing God's righteousness.

The Hebrew word used here for "righteousness" is

(צְדָקָה)

It conveys the idea of conforming to a standard or norm that is right and never changes.

God is perfect in his righteousness.

He is absolutely without sin.

God always conforms to His unchanging standard of love and justice as he deals with us.

There is absolutely none of sins distortion in his dealing with us.

God will never change, we can count on it ... His righteousness will never change ... he will always act with perfect righteousness towards us.

Right now, God is acting in your life with a righteousness towards you that is perfect and unchanging and holy ... and you can count on that.

In knowing God intimately and coming to know and experience God's steadfast and loyal love, God's perfect healing Justice and God's absolute righteousness, God's people are to imitate Him in the world with love, justice and righteousness ... and delight him with their lives.⁷

We are called to godly living for God in a world that wants to be godless, and wants to tempt us to be worldly.

Jesus said to his disciples: *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* (Mt. 5.48)⁸

Knowing God is a matter of closeness with God.

If personal achievement or ability will not please God in themselves, neither will outward conformity to religion.

Through the prophet God says he would punish those circumcised only in the flesh whether they were near or far.

Circumcision was the outward showing of the Israelite belonging to God.

It was the outward showing of what was supposed to be an inward reality ... a heart belonging to God.

God say's through Jeremiah that His people's faith in the outwardly religious, the covenant sign of circumcision, was a misplaced faith.

The sign was not worth anything if the heart was not fully engaged.

And the real warning is that a person in such a state would be looked upon by God in the same way that God looked upon the gentile ... the outsider.

God's people are urged to not remain uncircumcised ... in heart (cf. 4:4).

Neither circumcision nor Baptism nor any other outwardly religious action means anything unless the heart is engaged with God.

⁷Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc.) 1983, 1985.

⁸*The New Revised Standard Version*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.

Without the heart engaged we are as Paul told timothy,
*holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its
power ... (2Tim 3.15).*⁹

For God to engage your heart, you have to draw near to him.
*Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. (James 4.8)*¹⁰

In saying all this about getting closer to God to truly know
Him, I need to take a side-road for a moment and say
something about the ministry of Jesus and about
evangelism.

For too long we have limited our understanding of the
ministry of Jesus to a mere fire-fight ... and turned
evangelism into a selling of fire insurance.

We have limited our understanding of the ministry of Jesus
to his atoning sacrifice on the cross to pay the price for
sin to save people from hell.

We have motivated our evangelism almost exclusively with a
focus on hell and saving people from it.

Salvation or eternal life, has been rendered to a mere fire
escape ... which in terms of Hell it certainly is.

This very limited understanding is not how Jesus defined his
ministry or eternal life.

Jesus said to God just before going to the cross, and I quote,
*“Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son
may glorify you, ² since you have given him authority over all
people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³
And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true
God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. (John 17.1-3)*¹¹

Jesus also said about his ministry: *“I am the way, and the
truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through
me. ⁷ If you know me, you will know my Father also.” (John
14.6-7)*¹²

⁹*The New Revised Standard Version*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.

¹⁰*The New Revised Standard Version*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.

¹¹*The New Revised Standard Version*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.

¹²*The New Revised Standard Version*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.

The Gospel writer John described the ministry of Jesus thus:
grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ *No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.* (John 1.18)¹³

I could go on and on but my side-road point is simply this; What ever else it is, what ever else it includes, the very essence of eternal life is wrapped up in a knowing and intimate relationship with God.

What ever else the ministry of Jesus is, the very essence of Jesus ministry; his birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension, is to provide eternal life in an intimate and knowing relationship with God, whom he says we can know so intimately that we can call Him "our Father".

Yes Jesus died on the cross to save us from our sin. But it is high time we got hold of the rest of the story. Sin had to be removed as the one thing that kept us far away from God.

Sin and its hellish effects had to be dealt with so that we could have access to the completely Holy Other.

Why?

So that we could draw close to God and have fellowship with Him ... so that we could enter into the eternal and life-giving intimate relationship that God wants to have with us.

You and I are saved for a reason ... to know God as father and live forever as his child.

Its time that we told the rest of the story in our evangelism. It is a positive story ... a story full of hope and love and life that people need to hear.

It is a story, which is the Gospel truth.

III. Conclusion

Some concluding words about Jeremiah 9. 23-26.

¹³The New Revised Standard Version, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.

Out of all the things one could have and even boast about having, God says that knowing Him intimately and subsequently becoming like him in acting with steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the world, is the only thing worth having or boasting about.

And as far as God is concerned, knowing him intimately and becoming like him in action is what brings delight to Him (Jeremiah. 9.24 & Hosea. 6.6).

To do this you have to get closer.

Getting closer with regards to God is a matter of personal dealing and personal involvement with Him.

You have got bring him into everything in your life. ... every aspect of your life ... even your lamenting

It is really very much like any other relationship.

It means an investment of time, commitment and trust.

God already knows you and me.

Jesus said, *even the hairs of your head are all counted.* (Lk. 17.4)¹⁴.

God says; *See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.* (Isaiah 49.16)¹⁵

The real invitation is to get to know Him who knows us; to get closer to him and receive eternal life from him.

Jesus said: *this is eternal life, that they may know... the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom (He) has sent.*¹⁶(John 17.3).

¹⁴The New Revised Standard Version, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.

¹⁵The New Revised Standard Version, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.

¹⁶The New King James Version, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1998, c1982.