

**Columbia, Missouri**  
**The Worship of God • February 13, 2022**



**The Scripture**  
**Jeremiah 1:4-14; 17-19**

*Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.” Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”*

*The word of the LORD came to me, saying, “Jeremiah, what do you see?” And I said, “I see a branch of an almond tree.” Then the LORD said to me, “You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it.” The word of the LORD came to me a second time, saying, “What do you see?” And I said, “I see a boiling pot, tilted away from the north.” Then the LORD said to me: Out of the north disaster shall break out on all the inhabitants of the land. But you, gird up your loins; stand up and tell them everything that I command you. Do not break down before them, or I will break you before them. And I for my part have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall, against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the LORD, to deliver you.*

**The Message**  
**“Small Victories: Short Yardage”**  
**Mark Briley**

My middle son, Dane, first joined a football team in the second grade playing for the Bixby Blue Spartans. Being his first year, there was a lot to learn. Weighing in at about 47 pounds soaking wet, Dane played the guard position on both the offensive and defensive lines. Isn't that the cutest lineman you've ever seen? At practice one evening, I was sitting with several other parents as we watched our boys grind it out on the field. One of the football moms, who was analytical about everything and super into the game, leaned over to me as her son lined up in the fullback position in practice. *“He doesn't usually run the ball,”* she says, *“Coach just puts him there in short yardage situations. He's not the fastest and can't really dodge the tacklers, but he's tough and can press through the middle to get the first down.”* I nodded to her understandably as I watched these tiny kids with huge shoulder pads and extra-large helmets that made their heads bounce around like bobble-head dolls try to play some semblance of football. She was proud of her fullback.



The fullback on the football team doesn't get much glory. In fact, today's Super Bowl competitors, the Los Angeles Rams and Cincinnati Bengals, don't even list a traditional Full Back on their rosters at all. Not nearly as flashy as the more agile and swift running backs, receivers or hybrid backs these days.

Growing up, it was Christian Okoye, fullback for the Chiefs that put in the work. His nickname was the *Nigerian Nightmare* if that gives you a picture. He was thick and strong and plowed up the middle through all the traffic of large human bodies. Cowboy's fans remember Daryl Johnston who was Emmitt Smith's fullback – blocking for and carving paths for Smith to run the ball with less resistance. Johnston's nickname? *Moose*. The Chiefs most recent fullback of some notoriety was Anthony Sherman – 5'10", 250 pounds and nicknamed? *Sausage. Nightmare. Moose. Sausage*. Get the picture?

These guys were in the grind, clearing paths and protecting others most of the time while gaining the short yardage when the team called on them to carry the ball. No time for fancy celebrations. There's work to be done. And they just did it. Strength in the trenches. The fullback is the player given small-victories-duty on any given play. We're in week two of our *Small Victories* series looking for progress in those short yardage downs in our lives.

The prophet Jeremiah was the fallback of Team Prophet. God had work for him to do, and when it was go time, he was going to do it. Some people write better than they live; others live better than they write. *“Jeremiah, writing or living, was the same Jeremiah. This is important to know because Jeremiah is the prophet of choice for many when we find ourselves having to live through difficult times.”* We live in some disruptive times, don’t we? Jeremiah’s life spanned one of the most troubled periods of time in Hebrew history. The fall of Jerusalem. The Babylonian exile. Everything that could go wrong pretty much did. Jeremiah found himself right in the middle of it all. But he stuck it out, *“Praying and preaching, suffering, and striving, writing, and believing. He lived through crushing storms of hostility and furies of bitter doubt. Every muscle in his body was stretched to the limit by fatigue; every thought in his mind was subjected to questioning; every feeling in his heart was put through fires of ridicule.”*<sup>1</sup>

Maybe you feel a bit like this right now. It was not an easy go for Jeremiah. Thank God he was a short-yardage prophet for the grind was grueling.

Everyone gets their start somewhere, and that’s where we find our Scripture text this morning: Jeremiah’s start. Jeremiah is a PK if you will... a priest’s kid... coming from a line of priests. God speaks to Jeremiah with a different path for his life. *“Prophet to the nations, my man... that’s what I have in mind for you.”* As we all often do, Jeremiah protests initially. *“You’ve got to be kidding me, Master. I don’t know anything. I’m just a kid.”*

*“Kid”* may make us think of a second-grade football player, but the original word used more likely refers to a late teen to early 20-something. Some scholars have said that what Jeremiah was trying to say was, *“I’m just immature.”* He’s watching TikTok videos on his phone when a text message pops up on his screen: *“Hey, it’s me. You know, the Lord. Time to drop some prophecy.”* We all know the *“I’m just a...”* line all too well. *“I’m just a simple kid from the block.” “I’m just a soccer mom.” “I’m just a retiree trying to stay retired.” “I’m just a middle-aged man, caught in a middle-aged crisis, trying to be unaffected by everyone else’s problems.” “Surely you’re not suggesting I’m going to be some whacko prophet.”* God says, *“Don’t give me your ‘I’m-just-a’ nonsense and don’t call me Shirley. I’ll guide you through it all.”*

God anoints Jeremiah’s mouth with words to speak and gives him purpose with work to do. God says his job will be to pull up and tear down, take apart, scrap, and start over – building and planting. Whew... that is tiring, hard work to consider. And circumstances surrounding his effort only complicate the matter.

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<sup>1</sup> This quote and the others linked to Peterson are from his exegetical commentary on the context of the book of Jeremiah. This can be found in The Message’s introduction to Jeremiah. NavPress. 2002.

Eugene Petersen asks these pointed questions about Jeremiah's context, but I wonder if they don't speak into our context just the same. How would you answer these questions? *"What happens when everything you believe in and live by is smashed to bits by circumstances? Sometimes the reversals of what we expect from God come to us as individuals, other times as entire communities. When it happens, does catastrophe work to re-form our lives to conform to who God actually is and not the way we imagined or wished God to be? Does it lead to an abandonment of God? Or, worse, does it trigger a stubborn grasping to an old collapsed system of belief, holding on for dear life to an illusion?"*

We've known our share of *"smashed to bits by circumstances,"* haven't we? The pandemic has done some smashing, yes. And January seemed like the latest black hole that sucked out our hopes right out from under us. Or beloved friends from our congregation even this week – the Miller's whose home burned completely to the ground in the middle of the night. Thank God they were able to get out, but what do you do with this? Or other beloveds this week who sat next to their beloved partners of decades who are struggling mightily with their physical health and the heart-breaking debilitation of the minds of those they have loved more and longer than anyone in their lives. What do you do with those circumstances? You're wanting to throw a Hail Mary, but instead you feel like a fullback, trying to inch forward through the chaos of insurance realities, staffing shortages, and moving to the next level of care when you just want to live and laugh and look into the eyes of the one whose soul is bound to your own and receive back that knowing look that they get you like they always have. Or another yet who is trying to raise teens alone and is shooting in the dark saying, *"Hope I'm doing it right!"* We're looking at our lives with uncertainty and frustration and sadness and weariness.

God's asking the question of us that he did of Jeremiah: *"What do you see?"*

*"Oh God,"* he must have thought as he looked all around him. *"I don't know."* And what does Jeremiah say, *"I see a stick."* God must have done that slow acknowledgement we offer to kids when we ask them something serious, and all they can think of is to tell you, *"My grandma has six toes on one foot."* True story. *"A stick? Okay. Good,"*

God replies to Jeremiah. *"Good eyes, kid. That means, um, I'm sticking with you all the way. What else do you see?"*

Jeremiah says, *"I see a boiling pot spilling over."*

*"Bingo!"* God says. *"Tough things ahead, and there will be a reckoning."*

Nobody enjoys that reality, I suppose. Jeremiah's no different. But God says, "Get dressed to work." Many of the older versions say, "Gird up your loins!" which is just funny to say. I got the funniest meme from a friend this week, believe it or not, who knew nothing of this text being our focus today. My friend wrote, "When I see your

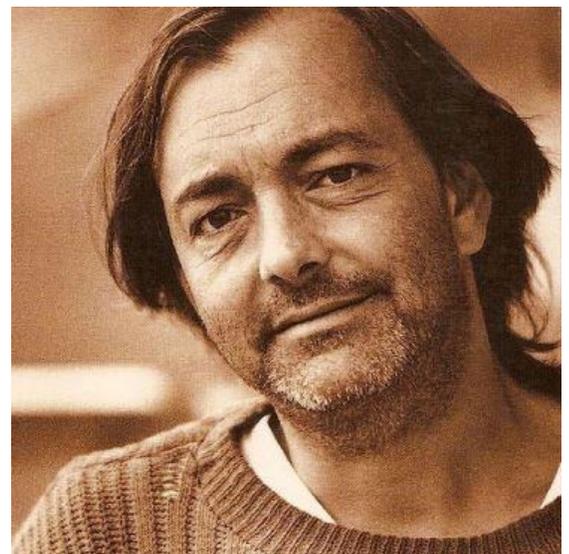


name in my inbox with the subject line 'a few things'... and then this meme: "Gird Your Loins." Can you believe it? I loved that. But the idea is that this isn't going to be easy, and you're going to be uncomfortable, and you're going to get dirty.

My youngest son, Hayes, used to say, "Dad, put on your mow-the-lawn clothes," when we were gonna get dirty. I wear the same shirt and shorts every time I mow the yard – they're dirty and torn and smell like lawn no matter how much you wash them, so I stick with it. Time to get to work! And it may be fullback-carrying-short-yardage-small-victory-work for a while – maybe for a long while, but we've got to do it somehow, someway.

It's why Adonica, as our director of community engagement, and our Mission and Outreach team put together tangible ways to gird up our spirits and get engaged in the community. When tough things happen in our lives and in our communities, we need to hear God asking us, "What do you see?" Then we need to ask God in return, "What do you need me to do?" How does my faith inform my role in the healing that is needed? So, we donate soup cans and funds to support people in need. We get engaged in Black History Month educational and justice-oriented opportunities. We give a ride to church. We pull together a group of friends and say, "This matters to me... you? Let's take a step." We don't throw up our hands. We gain the hard, short yardage knowing that forward is the only way toward the larger victory.

If you've been a Christian for a few decades, you're probably familiar with the name Rich Mullins. He died in a tragic car accident the year I graduated from high school. He was one of the so-called ragamuffin Christians – which was an endearing term, not derogatory. He wrote songs – some deeply authentic and moving songs. Sad, in some ways, as most people know him best for his song "Awesome God" which starts with the line, "When he rolls up his sleeves, he ain't just puttin' on the ritz." Not sure that would be Rich's favorite tune -- the song he'd be most known for -- but I can sing it by heart since my childhood. I have a friend who is essentially non-Christian (*she would give Jesus the nod like I do to Ramen Noodles*



*qualifying as pasta when necessary)* but she doesn't practice or express faith in any tangible way. Even so, she could name this one Christian song and would be the first to say, "I love that song about God puttin' on the ritz." Sorry, Rich.

Rich had Quaker roots, stemming from a very peace-driven people. You could hear his opposition to violence in songs with lyrics like: "Why do the nations rage? Why do they plot and scheme? The bullets can't stop the prayers we pray in the name of the Prince of Peace." Rich made statements about Christianity not being about building an absolutely secure little niche in the world, separate from those different than us, but being about loving like Jesus who loved those *different* when others refused. Rich spoke in a chapel service at Wheaton College once saying, "You're into the "born-again" thing, and that's great. Jesus said that to a man named Nicodemus. 'To enter the kingdom of God, you need to be born again.' But if you tell me that I've got to be born again, I can tell you that you need to sell everything you have and give it to the poor because Jesus said that to one guy, too." He added, "But I guess that's why God invented highlighters... so we can highlight the parts we like." Ya burnt!

There's another old story about Rich... back around 1989... about him and a buddy riding on a train. "As they travelled, they shared about their deepest struggles, pouring out their souls, including some of the not-so-pretty stuff. As they arrived at the station, one of the passengers in front of them recognized Rich, and said, "Excuse me, are you Rich Mullins?" Rich said that he immediately began to rehearse in his mind all the things she might have heard him say... and he had to decide whether or not he was Rich Mullins. And of course, he looked her in the face, smiling, and said, "Yes... I am Rich Mullins." He owned his stuff, and he gave us permission to own ours too." Is there a greater gift than authenticity?

People will often claim that the church is full of hypocrites. Rich would often say, "No we aren't full of hypocrites... we always have room for more." Our Christian reality is not one of perfection – it's about falling in love with a perfect God and hopefully becoming more like the one we love. Week after week, but especially today, we must ask ourselves, "Am I committed to that?"

Shane Claiborne is a writer and Jesus follower, who interacted and was greatly shaped by Rich. He wrote much of this about Rich including this: "Rich Mullins is one of the most interesting people I've ever known. Interesting because he was honest — not perfect. He made you feel like Jesus was right beside you -- part of the band, telling stories around the fire, laughing with you at the bar. He made you feel like you could own your darkness and be honest with your doubts. He knew that inside each of us there is a sinner and a saint at war, and on good days the saint prevails, and on bad days... [well] Jesus loves sinners. He is one of the most important people in the history of modern evangelicalism, a ragamuffin that our children and our grandchildren need to

*know about.” Shane danced with his wife on their wedding day to Rich’s song called, “If I Stand.” The song says this: “So if I stand, let me stand on the promise that You will pull me through... And if I can’t, let me fall on the grace that first brought me to You.”<sup>2</sup>*

I don’t stand here confident of much today... but... I *am* confident in Jesus Christ... his love; his grace... for me, for the Millers, for our friends trying with every ounce of their being to care for their partners, for parents of teens, for Rich, for Shane and his wife; for second graders trying a new thing; for those paralyzed in fear and those whose mouths are touched by God to speak; for *you*... for *you*.

When I’m paralyzed by conflict or hurt or matters of injustice, I need to gird up my loins with Jeremiah and go for the small victory of short-yardage gains. That won’t solve it all, but it is the necessary work of forging ahead like a fullback of faith... making a way, creating a path for others to find a way through and lining up to do it all over again.

**Song of Focus**  
**“Forward with Small Wins”**  
**Words and Music: Ed Varnum**

1. We press on in the promise,  
taking one step at a time.  
Step by step, each small win  
moves us forward in our climb,  
knowing one day we'll look back,  
see the reason and the rhyme.  
Kept our eyes on the promise,  
taking one step at a time.
2. Celebrating small victories,  
moving forward with small wins,  
the moral arc of the universe  
to God's justice always bends.  
Though the arc seems so long now,  
we trust victory in the end!  
Keep your eyes on the promise,  
celebrating the small wins.
3. Celebrating small victories,  
moving forward with small wins,  
the moral arc of the universe  
to God's justice always bends.

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<sup>2</sup> All the references to Rich Mullins came from Shane Claiborne’s Facebook tribute to Rich in honor of the 19<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of his death a few years ago now. <https://www.facebook.com/ShaneClaiborne/>

Though the arc seems so long now,  
we trust victory in the end!  
Keep your eyes on the promise,  
celebrating the small wins.

**BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH**