

Jeremiah 29:1-14

Exile has begun. Jeremiah told everyone it was going to happen, and now the Babylonians have deported community leaders and skilled workers, the cream of Jerusalem. The prophet Hananiah is going around telling everyone it's going to be okay and God is going to deliver them, but Jeremiah says No, this is just the beginning. It's going to get worse. Today's reading is from a letter that he writes to that first tranche of exiles already in Babylon, who are probably in shock and denial, unable to accept that God would allow them to be taken by this savage nation, and holding onto the hope that they'll soon, miraculously, be on their way back home.

When I imagine how they must have been feeling, I think of Lt. Hiroo Onodo, the Japanese soldier found hiding in the jungle of the Philippines, in 1974, 30 years after being stationed there as an army intelligence officer. Told to continue guerrilla warfare against the Americans as the war drew to a close, he survived on coconuts and bananas and later told interviewers that he evaded "enemy patrols" –but they were actually search parties. His superior officer had told him, "You are absolutely forbidden to die by your own hand. It may take three years, it may take five, but whatever happens, we will come back for you. Until then, so long as you have one soldier, you are to continue to lead him."

And by golly, Lt. Onodo did just that. He disregarded as Allied propaganda the leaflets dropped over the jungle claiming the war had ended. Newspapers were left in the open telling of the end of the war, and friends and relatives made announcements over loudspeakers into the jungle, all to no avail. One of his four men finally ran away in 1949 and surrendered to the authorities, while another man was shot dead in 1954 in a skirmish with locals . Lt Onoda's last

remaining colleague was killed in 1972. Finally that original superior officer of his was located and sent to the Philippine jungle, where he waited for the tenacious lieutenant. Major Taniguchi read out the order to cease all combat activity and that the war was over. Lt Onoda was unable to grasp the news. "We really lost the war?" was his first response, he wrote in his memoirs. "How could they have been so sloppy?"ⁱ

That's the disbelief and cognitive dissonance I imagine the exiles are experiencing in Babylon. Jeremiah tells them what they don't want to hear: get used to it. This is the new reality, and will be for the foreseeable future. It seems like a harsh message, and in a way it is, but it also contains the strategy for survival—one step at a time, left foot, right foot, set up the life you're going to live. Don't put on blinkers and obstinately fight a war that's already lost. Instead, build houses, plant gardens, raise children—be fruitful and multiply. And "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." That last has to be particularly hard to swallow—to be asked to contribute to the vitality of the enemy. God wants the exiles to make life better for their enemies and oppressors, to find kinship with them. That's going to take some work.

Part of the tension/complexity of this advice is that, according to Jeremiah, there *will* be an end to the exile. It's just that few people in his audience will live to see it. But the cataclysm that is continuing to unfold is actually not outside of God's sphere of influence; it's part of God's intentions. In Jeremiah's view, and in the view of most prophets, God uses international powers in order to punish or prosper Israel, and so this miserable experience is actually God's idea, not Babylon's. Prophets like Hananiah who say that we need to rise up and overthrow Babylon are wrong because this exile is God's will. It's a funny kind of reassurance. On the one

hand, Jeremiah says that things are only going to get worse, not better, and that the exiles shouldn't fight it. But on the other hand, he's clear that there is ground beneath their feet that will *not* crumble—that the God who let Jerusalem be overthrown is still God, and still has long-term plans, just you can't see them. It's cold comfort, but it is kind of a comfort.

We are, of course, chronically and acutely in a time of violation and violence. What this passage suggests to me is that when the future looms ominously, we shouldn't put too much energy into figuring out when and how things turn around. Or rather, we shouldn't wait to do anything until we've figured out when and how things turn around. Sometimes I catch myself reading Twitter or news websites obsessively, and I realize that at some level I'm trying to find out how the story will end. I'm trying to end the suspense. Well, guess what, nobody knows, so it's not going to appear on any news website, and the suspense is a fact of life. Rather, we have to put energy into nurturing everything that embodies hope—gardens, children, housing—and accept that we may never see what our investments yield.

The poet C. P. Cavafy wrote a very canny poem, "Waiting for the Barbarians," in which leaders in ancient Greece prepare to yield their land to barbarians only to discover that the barbarians, so necessary to political and social change, no longer exist. Only suspense persists.

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?

The barbarians are due here today.

Why isn't anything going on in the senate?

Why are the senators sitting there without legislating?

Because the barbarians are coming today.

What's the point of senators making laws now?

Once the barbarians are here, they'll do the legislating.

Why did our emperor get up so early,

and why is he sitting enthroned at the city's main gate,
in state, wearing the crown?

Because the barbarians are coming today
and the emperor's waiting to receive their leader.
He's even got a scroll to give him,
loaded with titles, with imposing names.

...

Why this sudden bewilderment, this confusion?
(How serious people's faces have become.)
Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,
everyone going home lost in thought?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians haven't come.
And some of our men just in from the border say
there are no barbarians any longer.

Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
Those people were a kind of solution.ⁱⁱ

We can become immobilized by the conviction that we know what is going to happen,
just as we can become immobilized by the confusion of not knowing what is going to happen.
Jeremiah's Advent message to us is, right foot, left foot, remember to bathe. Look around at
where you are, and see where help is needed. Take some soup over to the elderly Babylonian
lady who lost her son in the war. Help rebuild the well that collapsed in the last earthquake,
the well that keeps the city of Babylon watered and healthy. Invite the Babylonian neighbor
kids to your kid's birthday party. Live with hope, but not a hope of anything specific. Is that
hard? Yes, it is.

God of hope,
How often have we found ourselves in exile, separated from your presence! Restore us, and let
us find you when we seek you. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.scotsman.com/news/world/japanese-soldiers-60-years-jungle-2460652>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51294/waiting-for-the-barbarians>