

October 9, Ordinary 28C (Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7)

It's not that Babylon was backward. But it wasn't home.

by [Diane Roth](#) in the [October 2022](#) issue

"I could never live in a place like this." I remember the day the movers came to pack up my belongings and move me out of the parsonage where I served in rural South Dakota. It was a tiny town with an abandoned gas station, no school, no bank, no café. When one of the movers asked where they could go to get lunch, I told him—ten miles away in the next town. And then he said it: "I could never live in a place like this."

He said it more than once, in fact, throughout the day. The refrain gave me pause. I had, in fact, "lived in a place like this." For four years I had called it home. Sort of.

I'm not sure I've ever said such a thing out loud, but I'm sure I have at least wondered about it. *Could I live in a place like this?* It didn't seem that difficult, as a young adult, to travel to and live in Japan. But lately I have felt less accommodating and more concerned about the lack of amenities, the politics, or the simple loneliness that might come with living in a given place.

The people of Judah were carried off to a place they didn't want to go. Jerusalem was more than a place to them; it was more than home. It was the location of the promise, the place where their hopes and their identity were grounded. I imagine them in Babylon saying that they could never live in such a place.

Yet there they were. And, according to Jeremiah, this was the place to which God had carried them.

It's not that Babylon was backward. The captives were not slaves, either. They were allowed to move about freely. They were allowed to go about their lives. But it was not home. It was not the place on which their hopes and dreams, their purpose, rested. "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" they ask (Ps. 137:4).

Yet that's what Jeremiah wants them to do. Those are his instructions to people who think they could never live in a place like that. He doesn't want them to assimilate—but he doesn't want them to wall themselves off, either. Instead, they are to seek the peace and prosperity—the shalom—of the place where God has carried them.

But how could they do that? That's the question. How can we? I ask this question knowing full well that I am not an exile. Sure, I live in Texas now, far away from my midwestern home. There are certainly times when I wonder how I can live in a place like this, but it's not the same as living among the people who have conquered you. Still, I wonder what it would look like for me to seek the shalom of the place where I am now.

In Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Animal Dreams*, a young woman named Codi returns to her childhood home in Arizona to care for her aging father. It's not what she would have chosen, but it's where she finds herself. She discovers some letters from her sister, Hallie, who has moved to Nicaragua and is living and working there, teaching sustainable agriculture.

Codi can't understand her sister. How could she go live in a place like that? In one letter, Hallie tries to explain: "The very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance, but live right in it, under its roof." She goes on to say what she hopes for: "Elementary kindness. Enough to eat, enough to go around. The possibility that kids might one day grow up to be neither the destroyers or the destroyed."

Shalom. That's the promise given to us. And seeking it is the only way any of us can live in a place like this world.