

October 12, Ordinary 28C (Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7)

Jeremiah isn't panicking. He's incandescent with holy resolve.

by [MaryAnn McKibben Dana](#) in the [October 2025](#) issue

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A few months ago I hosted a Zoom happy hour for some far-flung clergy friends—a revived practice from Covidtide, newly salient as we figure out how to be both prophetic and pastoral, hopeful and grounded, amid the constant chaos of our political moment. We checked in about how our people were doing, loved ones and parishioners alike.

One friend made an offhand comment that stuck with me: “Yeah, some of my folks are pretty ‘hair on fire’ right now . . . though interestingly, they’re often not the ones most directly affected by what’s going on.”

I followed up with my friend later, wanting to hear more. She reminded me of that old phrase, “When you’re going through hell, keep going.” People who are just trying to survive, she mused, don’t often have the mental bandwidth to let themselves pause and wallow in how awful things really are. In those situations, we have to protect our sanity and our hearts, controlling what we can control and letting other stuff go.

“Folks who are more ‘hair on fire’ seem to have the luxury of watching things unfold from a (somewhat) safer distance,” she went on. “It’s a privilege in a way, to be able to be offended or angered by every news story. But being less affected gives you license to be less grounded, less focused. These people are coming from a very compassionate, good place, they just haven’t found their action steps.”

If Jeremiah’s hair is on fire, it’s in a different sense than my friend is describing. Jeremiah isn’t panicking; he’s incandescent with holy resolve. It’s the sixth century BCE, the capital city of Jerusalem has fallen, and the people have been forced into exile in Babylon. What does this mean for the people of Israel? What are they to do in this new, foreign place? Jeremiah’s answer is clear and surprising: “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

Jeremiah has long been one of my favorite improv teachers. He exhorts the people to get busy living, right where they are. It’s a stunning expression of the cardinal rule of improv, which is to “yes-and”: We receive what life offers us, even if we never would have chosen it, and build on it in some peacebuilding way. To yes-and requires openness to the circumstances at hand, wretched though they may be, while remaining leavened by an almost reckless nerve.

Meanwhile, the prophet Hananiah has been peddling a very different message to the people: that the exile will only last a couple of years. Here we see a stark reminder of the difference between optimism (don’t worry, this madness will all be over soon) and hope (we will seek God’s shalom in this grueling season, however long it lasts). Rabbi Jonathan Sacks surely had Hananiah and Jeremiah in mind when he drew his own distinction between optimism and hope: “Optimism is a passive virtue, hope an active one. It needs no courage to be an optimist, but it takes a great deal of courage to hope. The Hebrew Bible is not an optimistic book. It is, however, one of the great literatures of hope.”

Despite hope often being portrayed as a lofty ideal, I find that it is best understood as relentlessly practical: *build, plant, marry, live*. In the next breath, Jeremiah provides the rationale for this everyday labor: *Seek the welfare*

of others, because in so doing, you will find your own welfare.

For Jeremiah, all this labor has a prophetic purpose: to bear witness to the God of the universe who is not bound to any particular land, who is still at work even when it seems otherwise. This, after all, is the prophet who will make a big show of buying land even from a prison cell, measuring out the coins and signing the deed, John Hancock style, for all in the court to see.

In addition to being prophetic, there's also some interpersonal utility to Jeremiah's words. There will be no imminent rescue. The people are going to be there for a couple generations. They can't put lives on hold.

But here in 2025, with so much hair on fire, I'm also hearing Jeremiah's call as having an emotional benefit. There's no time for doomscrolling when you're measuring drywall. It's harder to succumb to despair when you're focused on pulling weeds.

As Ram Dass is reported to have said, whether it's the first day of the golden age or the first day of the apocalypse, the work is the same: to love others and to alleviate suffering. Jeremiah invites the people to live as people of shalom in the horrible meantime of exile, because God remains a God of shalom—for individuals, communities, and the world.