

## FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**February 2, 2025, The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Epiphany**

Isaiah 65: 17-25, Matthew 11:28-30

**All Shall Be Well**

*“All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”* --Julian of Norwich

I'm sure many of you have seen the small crosses at the side of the road, that mark the site where someone's loved one has died in a car accident. If you've travelled in the southwestern United States, or Latin America, you've probably seen many more of them along the roads there too. Some are small wooden crosses that have the name of the person on them, others are decorated with plastic flowers, stars, and other memorabilia, and some are very elaborate shrines to the person who has died.

In the southwest, and in the Spanish language, these crosses of remembrance are known as “desconsos,” which is the Spanish word, for resting place.

I learned about “desconsos” about 29 years ago when I went to my first Ghost Ranch Conference in New Mexico.

That year my friend Jenn and I were taking a women's spirituality course, and we did all kinds of writing, praying and creating.

Near the beginning of the week, we spent one afternoon beside the Chama River, looking backwards at our lives, before we began to look forward. One of the teachers led us through an exercise she had found in the book *Women Who Run with the Wolves* by Clarissa Pinkola-Estes. It was based on “desconsos,” the crosses that are resting places, and places of remembrance.

Pinkola-Estes writes: “DESCONSOS are symbols that mark a death. Right there, right on that spot, someone's journey in life halted unexpectedly...Something happened there that altered that person's life and the lives of other persons forever...”

To make DESCONSOS means taking a look at your life and marking where the small deaths, and the big deaths, have taken place. (She writes) I like to make a time-line of a [person's] woman's life on a big long sheet of white butcher paper, and to mark with a cross the places along the graph, starting with [their] her infancy all the way to the present where parts and pieces of [their selves] her self and [their lives] her life have died.

We mark where there were roads not taken, paths that were cut off, ambushes, betrayals and deaths. I put a little cross, (or a big cross) along the time-line at the places that should have been mourned, or still need to be mourned...”

“This allows you to document, honor and grieve those individual deaths along the way—and leave them where they are meant to be left – in the past, honored, acknowledged, and on a road already taken in your life.”

<https://www.tangledsky.com/desconsos-exercise>

Our spirituality class then spent the next hour, with the sounds of the river in the background, making timelines of our lives, and marking large and small desconsos where the big deaths and the little deaths had taken place in our lives. The women in our group marked the “big deaths” such as the death of a spouse, child or friend. Others drew “big crosses” for the “big deaths” of: their house burning down, permanent physical injury, childhood abuse, substance abuse and addiction, times when they were without work and hungry.

And there were the “smaller crosses”, or “smaller deaths,” which also needed to be remembered and mourned: the loss of a job, a move in childhood, a promotion not received, the

betrayal by a friend, colleague, parent, spouse, or church,  
 an important project that failed, the college acceptance that never came, the dream that died.

It was a powerful exercise, and review of our lives. And its purpose was not to dwell in the past, but to realize that all of us had small deaths and big deaths that we had never mourned, that were a part of our life journeys.

It gave us the choice of finally addressing and grieving some of those losses.

It gave us a safe time and a place to forgive ourselves and forgive others.  
 It called us to look forward with a truer picture of who we had been,  
 and who we wanted to be as women, as children of God and people of faith.

It took us to a place of deeper honesty with our past, and gave us hope for  
 the present and the future.

Hope for the present and the future is the message of God for each one of us today, here in this place, as we prepare for a season of change in our life together.

It was also the message for the Israelites that Isaiah was prophesying to in this morning's reading from the Old Testament. The book of Isaiah is really three books in one, all based around one of the big deaths in Israel's history, the Babylonian Exile.

In the late 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. the Babylonian army attacked and conquered Israel and led the people into exile and slavery.

The City of God, Jerusalem was in ruins, the Temple—the House of God where the people knew God met them, was destroyed, their fields and crops and homes were destroyed.

As the crow flies they were taken 500 miles from home, but by the caravan routes they were forced to walk nearly 1,000 miles into slavery across the Arabian Desert from Judah to Babylon .

For 47 years (from 586 B.C. to 539 B.C.), they were far from home, slaves in a foreign land.

Throughout those years the prophet Isaiah spoke God's challenges and God's love to the people. Before the Babylonian invasion, during the years of exile, and on the return to their homeland, Isaiah showed the people God's heart.

[The beginning of the book of Isaiah ("1<sup>st</sup> Isaiah", chapters 1-39) comes before the exile as Isaiah pleads with the people to return to their God. What is known as "Second Isaiah (chapters 40-55) takes place while the people are in exile, and "Third Isaiah" (chapters 56-66) holds the prophecies in the years that Israel returned to their homeland.]

In the passage we read this morning God is speaking to people who have left a pathway of desconsos throughout the past 47 years.

They have watched loved ones die in battle, die in the walk across the desert, and then die in slavery. Their place of worship is gone, they have returned to a land in ruins, no homes, no crops, and no safety. They are a changed people

Then, in the midst of these big and small deaths in their lives God says: "I am going to do something new. I am going to show you again what my plan has been for you since the garden of Eden. But," God says, "we are not going back to the Garden, but forward to a New Jerusalem, forward to a new creation.

God tells them and tells us that God's plan is for a world where weeping is a dim memory. A world where all babies grow into adulthood

and people will live all the days of their lives.  
 A world where there is a home for everyone,  
 and there will be food so that all will eat, and no one will go hungry.  
 God's vision is for a world that is so full of peace and justice and the love of God  
 that wolves and lambs eat together,  
 and lions will no longer be a threat, because they will only eat straw.  
 God promises a day when the last tear has been wept, and pain and destruction is never allowed  
 again. And God will answer us even before we ask.

What's important is that God gives this vision to people who do know weeping, and do know  
 destruction and injustice, and do know a world without peace.  
 Into the midst of their placing desconsos for the past,  
 Into the midst of everything being changed, and there is no going back to the way it used to be,  
 Isaiah's words plant hope for the present, and the future.

These are words of hope that are also for us after our exiles, and slaveries, and  
 seasons of destruction and loss, and in our seasons of big change.

This is a Bible passage for us to come to after the desconsos have been planted on our lives'  
 timelines:

These hopeful promises are God's words for us after:  
 after the funeral,  
 after we've gotten the diagnoses,  
 after the separation and divorce,  
 after the bully at school has hurt you or embarrassed you again,  
 after you've immigrated to America and all is not as you thought it would be,  
 after we've left the hospice center for the last time,  
 after your dad moves out, and doesn't call on your birthday  
 after you get fired or downsized,  
 after the chemo and radiation  
 after your best friend chooses another group of friends at school,  
 after the stroke, after the heart-attack,  
 after you set down the bottle and call your AA sponsor,  
 after the bankruptcy,  
 after you say no to your abuser,  
 after you tell the truth to yourself in therapy,  
 after you retire from ministry and say goodbye to people you love,  
 after your pastor retires and you are waiting to see who your new pastor will be.

After the desconsos have been planted along the roadway in of our lives, God speaks through  
 the voice of Isaiah and says:

Do not let the desconsos crosses have the last word,  
 Do not let the big and small deaths have the last word,  
 Do not let your ongoing sorrows have the last word.  
 Because you are people of the empty cross and the empty tomb.

God says: let my promise of newness, of healing, of answered prayers, of justice and peace,  
 and enough for all, have the final word. Hear these words of hopeful promise as you sit by your  
 desconsos and grieve.

God is with us before our world is changed by our own Babylonian Exiles,  
 God is with us in the midst of our Babylonian Exiles,  
 and God is always with us after our Babylonian Exiles.

I am often reminded of this by one of my heroes in the faith, Julian of Norwich. She was a Catholic nun, who knew that God's final word was not death on the cross, but the resurrection of Easter Morning.

In the midst of her own horrendous physical suffering,  
 in the midst of the devastations of hunger, injustice, plague, and war of the Middle Ages,  
 in the midst of her soul-wrenching struggles with the life of faith,  
 in the midst of ministering to the people of Norwich, England, from her small cell on the side of  
 the church in Norwich,

Julian wrote words that echo down through the centuries to each one of us here this a.m.

*"All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."*

I have put these words onto cards for you that will be handed out during the offering. It is my hope you will take these cards home and put them in a place in your house, your office, your wallet where you will see them. After church I'll have extras if you want another one, or want to take one to someone else.

Because Julian's words, and God's promises are for you as a church, and for me as a pastor, as we prepare to walk on different paths.

These are words of strong promise about our God's love:

*"All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."*

We are people who live in the after,  
 after the big and small desconsos of our lives,  
 after the biggest desconsos of the cross on Golgotha and the death of Jesus.  
 We are God's children of the resurrection to new life.

In Jesus our Savior on Easter Morning we have seen God's greatest promise of perpetual love.

So let us plant our desconsos, and honor those places of real loss, and mourn in those places and rest in those places.

Then let us live in the present and look toward the future,  
 believing in the promises of our God who sits at our desconsos with us  
 and speaks to us of healing and new life. Because:

*"All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."*