

Comedian and New father, known as Michael Jr. recently shared about how he and his wife watched a video of the birth of their daughter, named Portland, and how he saw something in the video, that he hadn't noticed when he was there: "She was just about 2 minutes ½ old when the nurse took her and placed her under a warming lamp, and she began to cry. I came to her and said, "Ok, Portland. I'm right here. I'm right here. You're fine. It's ok." As I spoke to her, upon hearing me, she visibly calmed, soothed by my presence and voice. About 7 minutes later in the video, after the nurses had cleaned her up, Portland began to cry again, eyes and fists clinched, wailing. I came to her again, this time saying, "Portland, Portland. It's ok. It's good. I'm right here. I am right here. I love you. I love you." And with the words "I love you", something amazing happened. My daughter opened her eyes, looked right at me, calmed down and gurgled a little smile, as I said, "I'm right here, It's ok, It's ok."

Hearing words of reassurance, words spoken that tell us that it's ok, that we're ok, can make all the difference when we find ourselves in the midst of trauma, in unknown territory or when we feel consumed by fear. Each day we go about our lives, and then things happen: to us, to others, in the world. Things that shock and surprise us. Things that disturbed or offend us. Things that frighten us. And it is moments like these that we most need to hear a voice of assurance, a voice telling us that we are ok, that we will be ok.

This is the kind of space the disciples find themselves in. Things with Jesus are shifting. Judas has left, and there is more urgency in Jesus' words. The disciples have questions. They are trying to make sense of it all. Where he is going they can't go, he tells them. He won't be with them much longer, but he'll never leave them. They are to love others the way he has loved them, but how? In this, Jesus' farewell discourse, Jesus speaks important, final words to his beloved disciples. His hour is coming, and so, he tries to prepare them by offering words embedded with promise, with hope; words he hopes will guide and reassure them; that will give them comfort when they most need it. Our reading began with the words: "I will not leave you orphaned", words that at once evoke both comfort and discomfort. For they speak the assurance that Jesus won't abandon them, but also imply that he is going away.

What words does Jesus offer that can help us in times of struggle, of change, or when the evils of the world bears down on us? How might the words Jesus says to his disciples help us to process or make sense of the hard things we face?

Last weekend, there were two mass shootings: one in Buffalo, New York, and one in Laguna Hills, California. These are the latest two of 199 mass shootings that have taken place in our nation this year, a number that left me shocked, numb and feeling deeply distressed. With each incident our hearts sink, our anxiety heightens, and we may find ourselves feeling hopeless, overwhelmed, even afraid. There was a time when we might have thought of such shootings as random acts of violence; yet more often than not, they are not indiscriminate nor without intention, and therein lies what disturbs us so deeply: the truth that human beings intentionally choose to do harm to one another, and that we as individuals, communities and as a nation seem unable to stop this epidemic of killing from happening again and again.

In conversations with some from our community this week were shared expressions of fear and anxiety, of sadness and sorrow, of resentment and helplessness, of anger, and for some, resignation. We spoke of both the challenge of keeping the faith when the world seems to be falling apart and of the comfort and hope that can be found in turning to God in prayer as we do our best to hold on to Jesus' words. We spoke also of the importance of community in times when world events have the potential to divide us. In the wake of this violence, left to navigate our feelings which vary greatly from person to person, Jesus' words comfort and assure us, reminding us that we are not alone, that there is hope, even if it does not feel like it. We

need not only to remember and cling to Jesus' words, we need also to be intentional, checking in with one another, and offering our own words of assurance and hope, as we discern how we might respond.

So accustomed are the disciples to having Jesus with them, showing them the way, teaching and telling them what to do, that the thought of him not being with them paralyzes them. What are they to do? How will they go on? It is into this fear and worry that Jesus speaks: first, with the offering of shalom, of his peace, and the peace of the Paraclete, the Spirit, the one whom the Father will send to "go along beside" them when Jesus is no longer there in human form. It is the Holy Spirit who will bring peace to their troubled and afraid hearts, yet before they can comprehend the presence of the Spirit, perhaps the disciples need to hear Jesus' words of peace and promise. Perhaps Jesus' words of peace, and ours to one another, are what we need to hear as well, for when we offer one another the peace, like we do every Sunday, it is more than a friendly greeting. To give another one's peace is to bestow upon them a prayer, a prayer that for them, all shall be well.

When we, like the disciples, find ourselves confronted by the hardships and evil of the world, it may feel like God is distant, absent. In those times, we may turn to Jesus' promise that he will never abandon us, but that God, Jesus, and the Spirit to come will "abide", or dwell with and in us. John calls the Spirit by many names, each speaking to a particular attribute: Comforter; Intercessor; Companion; and here in today's gospel, Advocate. Jesus says it is the Spirit who will teach, guide and accompany us along the way, the expression of God who in the absence of the human Jesus, is always with us. In this way, Jesus will never leave us. While the disciples couldn't comprehend it then, Jesus was foretelling of the time when he would again bid them his peace, and then breathe upon them the Holy Spirit. To rise up out of their shock and grief, to go forward into the world to share God's love in the face of danger and persecution, Peter, James, John and all the disciples will need the Spirit's presence - for it is when they remember that they have not been abandoned and are never alone, that they may find the strength and the hope to go on.

This too is what Jesus is calling us to do. To remember that no matter how hard it gets, how broken the world seems, or how afraid and alone we feel in any given moment, that we have not been abandoned. We are not alone. God is with and in us. Jesus is with and in us. And the Holy Spirit is also with and in us in every moment, always; there to comfort and assure us, to hold and keep us, to sustain and strengthen us, to guide us and to give us courage to take a stand for God's love and justice in a world that is broken, in a world where people suffer, in our world that needs the promise and assurance of God's love and hope as much today as it did in Jesus' time. Jesus says to us, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid. Look to me and believe." These are words we can cling to and call upon for strength.

Reflecting upon his daughter's birth, and the sacred encounter they shared, Michael Jr. offered this wisdom. He said, "There are going to be times in life when it feels like you're going from conflict to conflict to conflict, or maybe, you are just full of fear, because of all the uncertainties right now. The key thing to do in those moments is to be still, and to listen to the Father's voice. Be still and listen to the Father's voice, because he is talking to you. And what he wants you to know is that he's right here. He loves you. All you have to do is open your eyes."