During the last supper, the disciples may have understood Jesus was leaving them, and that things would never be the same again. So Jesus speaks words of reassurance: “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.” In this final hour before his arrest, trial and crucifixion this is the main concern: Jesus is leaving the disciples, alone. Jesus’ words indicate the disciples feel like orphans.

Just like us. Especially at this time, many of us, or perhaps all of us, are feeling like orphans. We might not use the word ‘orphan’, but that is the feeling deep inside us.

What does it mean to be an orphan? To be an orphan means to be alone. Especially at this time, many of us are feeling very much alone. Many of us are spending day after day alone. Some of us might go three days or three weeks or three months without having a face to face conversation with another person. Now, more than ever, we are alone.

What does it mean to be an orphan? To be an orphan means to be physically separated from others. To be an orphan means to not have a person you trust to be physically close with. To be an orphan means not being touched by another person in a way that brings wholeness. Especially at this time, we are physically separated from one another.

What does it mean to be an orphan? To be an orphan means you have to take care of yourself. To be an orphan means there is no one else you can trust to watch out for you. To be an orphan means, whatever needs doing, you have to do it by yourself. Especially at this time, many of us, or perhaps all of us, in some way are feeling like orphans.

I’ll never forget the day I felt most like an orphan. It is easy for me to remember, because most days of my life I have not pointed my face to the heavens and yelled at the top of my voice. But on January 2, 2018 I pointed my face to the heavens and yelled at the top of my voice, “Do I have to do all of this by myself?”

January 2, 2018 was ten months after the death of my mother, and five months after the death of my first wife. It was one of the coldest nights of the winter, and we had just endured two or three days of near record cold temperatures. On that night I returned to my house late in the evening. I had driven the five-hour trip from Connecticut in the cold darkness. I had spent two days cleaning and doing minor repairs to my mother’s condominium. My station wagon was full of boxes and things to be sorted from my mother’s house. I opened the front door. The house was quiet and empty, as usual. The dining room table was stacked high with file folders, papers and mail; an unending pile of insurance claims and hospital bills. I heard the sound of dripping water in the basement. I opened the garage door to discover a large pool of water on the floor of the garage. Some water pipes for the kitchen, above the garage, had frozen and split open during the two days I was away. Water was streaming through seams in the sheetrock.

The first thing I did was to find the shut-off valve for the water system and close it. The second thing I did was to go outside into the cold darkness and point my face to the heavens and yell at the top of my voice, “Do I have to do all of this by myself?” A few minutes later I gave myself the answer, “Yes, you have to do all of this by yourself.” “Yes, you have to call the plumber and mop up the pool of freezing cold water and unload the station wagon and take care of all of that paper work.”

That answer wasn’t exactly correct. Betsy helped me. Bodo helped me. Grant and Denise and Julia and Mary and many others helped me. But it was true that, more than ever before or since, I felt like an orphan.

You may have felt like an orphan at some point. You might feel like an orphan right now. I used to think that only a few people experienced the feeling of being an orphan. Now, more than half way through my life I sense that this feeling that you are alone, feeling that you have to take care of all of the important business yourself, feeling there is no one you can really trust, is the common, almost universal experience.

At some point almost all of us feel like orphans. And to us, Jesus says, “I will not leave you orphaned, I am coming to you.” How does this happen? I ask this with more urgency than usual, because this is one of those things we really need to know right now. How is it that we will not be alone as we are
Jesus’ answer is not found in a single verse or in a single phrase. The answer is woven through the chapters that surround this passage. I borrow a thought from my favorite interpreter of the 4th Gospel, Gail O’Day, in suggesting the answer is found in layers of repetition of themes, woven together like a three-sided basket.

We see strands of the first side of the basket in this verse: On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. This side of the basket is comprised of layers of phrases about the close relationship between Jesus and the one he calls the Father. This first part of the answer has to do with the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus. At some point, you may feel quite alone in this world. The first step away from being an orphan is to listen to Jesus’ words and try to follow his way, because Jesus is our connection to the one who made us. Jesus is our connection to the source of our being. Jesus is our connection to the one who knows us best of all.

The first step can be difficult because this connection between God and Jesus and us feels amorphous and abstract. I find it helps to read more of the words and stories of Jesus. Some people say you have to believe in Jesus. That is not so helpful way for me. I would say it helps to know more of Jesus. It helps to really learn his story and to try to practice his teachings, like forgiveness. For all of us who, at least occasionally, feel like orphans the first step is to try to know and follow Jesus.

It is easiest to see strands of the second side of the basket in words like these from chapter 13: I give you a new commandment; that you love one another. Jesus refers to this passage when he says, If you love me, you will keep my commandments. The layers of this side of the basket, found all through chapters 13, 14, 15 and 16, are all about our love for others.

When we are feeling like orphans this second step can seem sort of backwards. Jesus seems to know we are feeling like orphans, but he commands us to love others. That is because that is the only way love works. You cannot choose for another person to love you, but you can choose to love another person. When you choose to love and care for another person you cease to be an orphan. So, in this second step as orphans, we make the life giving choice Jesus suggests, which is to love and care for others.

We see strands of the third theme in this verse: I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the third idea at the heart of these chapters; We are not alone. We are accompanied by a sacred presence. We could call this the Holy Spirit, or the living God. In the 4th Gospel Jesus uses a variety of words to refer to God’s continuing presence with us: the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth, the Counselor, the Holy Spirit. We may not know an exact name for the sacred, but we can look for signs of God’s presence in the world around us.

To take the simplest example, one of the ways I feel God’s presence is when I am with the plants in my garden or in my house. Even after years of growing lettuce, tomatoes and peas I am thrilled to see the new plants growing. I marvel at the roots, the vigorous growth of the stems and leaves, the beautiful mystery of flowers that turn into fruits. This is God’s creation, not mine.

When I am working with my plants, I realize God is working beside me. It might be different for you. You might get yourself to this place by taking a walk in the park or listening to the song of the birds, or watching people on your street.

In this third step God is reaching to us. Even though there is really no order to this, I put this step last because it is the easiest for us. In the first step we follow Jesus. In the second step we reach out to others. In the third step we look for the Spirit of God or for the living Christ or for the work of God’s creation, reaching toward us, growing around us.

Jesus began this fourteenth chapter of John with these words of assurance: Do not let your hearts be troubled. Today, Jesus moves even closer to the burden weighing us down, saying I will not leave you as orphans. So, let your heart be open. Learn Jesus’ story and follow his way. Especially if you are feeling alone, reach out to others. Look for God’s presence at work in the world around us.