

I was part of the campus choir at seminary, and one fall season we were preparing Joseph Haydn's *Mass in Time of War*, which was fitting as the United States, at the time, had sent a surge of more troops to Iraq. Our director brought in professional soloists for the occasion. Wonderful music, to be sure, but that isn't what stuck with me the most from that night.

The lights were darkened in the sanctuary to start that service of Evening Prayer, and then, seemingly out of nowhere, came this flickering light from the back corner. It was our Christ candle, that, traditionally, tends to only get lit for the more festive occasions on the church calendar: Easter and Christmas, perhaps Pentecost and for some baptisms here and there. But sometimes exceptions must be made to the hard-and-fast rules to drive the Gospel point home. After all, some were frightened that night. There were a few veterans enrolled in classes, then, not to mention others on campus and people who came to the service that evening, who would have to face the reality of family and friends being sent into a war zone.

So, sometimes exceptions must be made to drive the Gospel point home: that, no matter how dark our days may feel, no matter how bleak the vista may appear, the light of Jesus Christ, sometimes coming out of nowhere, will always find a way to creep in with some form of unexplainable hope. And yet, having said all that, that still isn't what stuck with me the most from that night.

We shared space and faculty with the Episcopal Church, and one of their professors had this voice that seemed to be the perfect female narrator tone not just for Scripture reading, but even for children's books, who maybe after a rough day at home and school, she would be just the one to listen to, to be assured of a love that would never fade away. And so, it was only fitting that the bigger kids in the room that night would be assured of the same relentless love that could reach all the world. So, with all due respect to the paid professional soloists to sing a classical piece from centuries past, her voice, her song, is what I remember most.

I had no idea this was going to happen, but all of a sudden, seemingly out of nowhere, she started to sing through all these countries, and not just sing their names, but she made them soar throughout the entire sanctuary space, including to people who were frightened about their own life, their own family, their own home, their own country, all understandably so. But you could tell from our rather sacred vantage point, sitting up front, and looking out to the assembly: the notes, the musical elevation, the Gospel was getting to them.

Because she was not only lifting them up as some world geography lesson: she was praying for all of them, she was praying peace to all of them, including places some of us had never heard, and not only that, but places that veterans had been that nearly tore their life apart, and places that that very night, were making lives of soldiers and their families rather nerve-racking, to say the least. And in that moment, we had to wonder, do we really need to pray for peace upon such places? Can't God give us a break in allowing us to have just a little animosity to even a few places that haven't exactly gone along with love and compassion?

But she kept on going anyway, as if we, in that very humble but holy space, were unleashing just a little peace upon every place, because that's just the way God operates. She kept on going, singing through all these countries, two by two, as if that almost seemed intentional by the composers of it: as if to remember a story when the vista seemed absolutely bleak, and all hope was vanquished for the Creation, and God insisted otherwise: two by two into a sanctuary, of sorts.

It's possible that song didn't hit everyone well that night. It was a lot to take in the moment, to be sure. The Gospel tends to do that, after all. But with each nation sung, it was almost as if we were wondering if God's grace could truly reach that far? It was as if with each verse, we wondered is God's love really that massive? It was as if each time, we sang the refrain, "For the healing of the nations, we pray to you, O God," that God was more than capable of embracing our fears and trepidation for our own people in service and for whatever other reason it may have been that night, but that somehow, somehow, God still had more than enough to reach well beyond our capacity that night.

And not just beyond our capacity for places well beyond our reach, but even in the depths of us, where we aren't so sure we have much compassion left to give. Christ has more than enough to still inspire us to further grace, more than enough light to shine throughout the earth, because for some reason, God still so loves the world that Christ was not only sent for along ago, but for these times and all these places, to never leave it behind. So, for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!