

Grant Keman

Transfiguring Prairie Skies

Archbishop Donald Bolen

EVERY DAY, CATHEDRAL of the Holy Family in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, is bathed in the light of the prairie skies. The beauty of that light has become a metaphor for the beauty of creation, covenant, incarnation, resurrection and glory in the stained glass windows of Sarah Hall. Windows let the light shine through, and in this instance, it is the light of natural and artistic beauty, coupled with the light of faith, which comes shining in.

The windows were designed with a prairie sensibility, depicting wide horizons and a sense of space and beauty that resonates with the prairie soul. Sarah notes: "I wanted the windows to tell a story that we all know — depicted new, for this place and time, but absolutely rooted in the Christian story. Visually, I wanted to communicate that all creation is permeated with the presence of God. The windows open a door for people and can serve as a catalyst for our spiritual lives." The name Sarah gave to the windows of the cathedral is *Lux Gloria* — the light of glory.

Creation

Sarah Hall's *Creation* window uses colour and light to speak the beauty and mystery of the created order. The outside panels explore the light that informed the creation of the universe. Sarah notes, "I started with the idea of the heavens." The three outside panels on either side of

Overleaf:
Detail, *Creation*,
Cathedral of
the Holy Family,
Saskatoon, SK
✦ 2011b

the window depict an explosion of light, galaxies being formed and the stars communicating the vastness of creation as a nascent universe is spoken into being. The dark blue attenuates the brightness of the outside light, evoking a beautiful sense of night sky even in the daytime.

Looking closely at the windows, one can detect what look to be lines of latitude and longitude, in this instance not those of the earth, but lines that are charting out the universe. Charts are human constructs, our efforts to measure out space, but here they are suggestive of creation being mapped out by God. The one who is infinite creates time and space, finitude; the immeasurable one creates that which can be measured.

In these panels, we can also glimpse the artist at play: the stained glass artist charting out the mind of God charting out creation; the creature probing the mind of the creator in bringing forth a universe, a home for creation. This is re-creation in the

purest sense, the artist at work in the interplay between reality and art, between what is real and the human effort to represent it. The imagination and love that were poured into the making of these windows bursts into the cathedral through waves of glorious light.

The six central panels of the *Creation* window depict the creation of the earth, with light being separated from darkness, the waters from the sky, as God authors the rhythms and cycles that will give texture to life on this planet. As the Spirit hovers over the newly formed waters, the sun rises and light cascades like a waterfall. The streaming colours, draping down, are suggestive of an alpha symbol, marking the beginning of life on earth.

The beauty of the sunrise depicted in the window, colours streaming to fill and spill over the horizon, communicates the joy of the act of creating. The impulse to create rests deep within the human spirit. Participation in the creation of something





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which is truly beautiful is a transcendent experience, one which taps us into God's own joy of creating.

Covenant

In following the imagery in Sarah Hall's *Covenant* window, we are engaged in the sacred act of remembering what God has done for us. God's covenant with Noah is part of a story of disobedience, destruction, renewed hope and starting over. At its heart is the promise that God has not given up on creation. Like every other covenant, it is accompanied by a sign: "I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth" (Genesis 9:12-13). The *Covenant* window depicts the rainbow around the outer edge of the sphere of light

reflecting God's presence in its central panels. While the ominous waves on the right and left sides of the window principally point to the parted waters of the Red Sea in the Exodus story, they are also suggestive of the flood waters of Genesis, now being held at bay, so that life may go on.

It is on the outer edges of the *Covenant* window, depicting a multitude of stars, that we are given a reminder of the covenant between God and Abraham. Sarah Hall wanted human beings symbolically present in each of the windows, and in the *Covenant* window, they are present as the promised descendants of Abraham who will be as numerous as the stars in the sky.

The central panels of the *Covenant* window depict God's appearance to Moses in the burning bush at the foot of Mount

Creation,
Cathedral of
the Holy Family,
Saskatoon, SK
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Top: Creation window up on the easel at Glasmalerei Peters

Left: Windows from left to right:
Creation, *Covenant*, *Incarnation*
and *Resurrection* (above the altar),
Cathedral of the Holy Family,
Saskatoon, SK ✦ 2011 b



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Top: *Covenant*,
Cathedral of
the Holy Family,
Saskatoon, SK
✦ 2011 b

Right:
Preparation for
a final studio
viewing of the
Covenant
window



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Sinai. The flames of the burning bush in the window's central panels are filled with the colours of the rainbow, God's covenantal promise of being with us shining in all its richness here. The windows suggest the passion and energy of the covenant as an active, living thing. At its heart, and rising from the burning bush, is the depiction of God's presence, in glorious light — Lux Gloria.

The rest of the window depicts the Exodus, which is the outcome of the conversation at the burning bush. Moses is sent;

Pharaoh is confronted; the people of Israel are led through the parted Red Sea and brought into freedom. Dominating the outside panels of the window are the parted walls of the sea. In the light just before dawn, the waves look particularly ominous, overwhelming. They stand in contrast with the burning bush in the middle of the window, an unquenchable fire radiating the brightness of God despite the vastness of the waves. The window holds that tension within it. In the sky, the clouds by day and fire by night are visible, the liberating hand of God leading the people to freedom yet again.

There is more tension below, in the long row of small, lit candles at the bottom of the window. In a window that stretches with the horizon, hundreds of small candles stand vertically upright, again representing human beings, each carrying a small light, upheld by the great light. Depending on the time of day and angle of light, they swing between reflecting the threatened character of hope, and the thought that despite the danger, all will be well. As Sarah notes, "the story is not done here; it still needs resolution."

Incarnation

The notion that God should become human, and should take flesh at "such-and-such a time," be born at "such-and-such a place," has often been met with incredulity. In the Incarnation, God penetrates and inhabits the ordinariness of life, and the thought of it — even if presenting its challenges — has long stirred the Christian imagination.

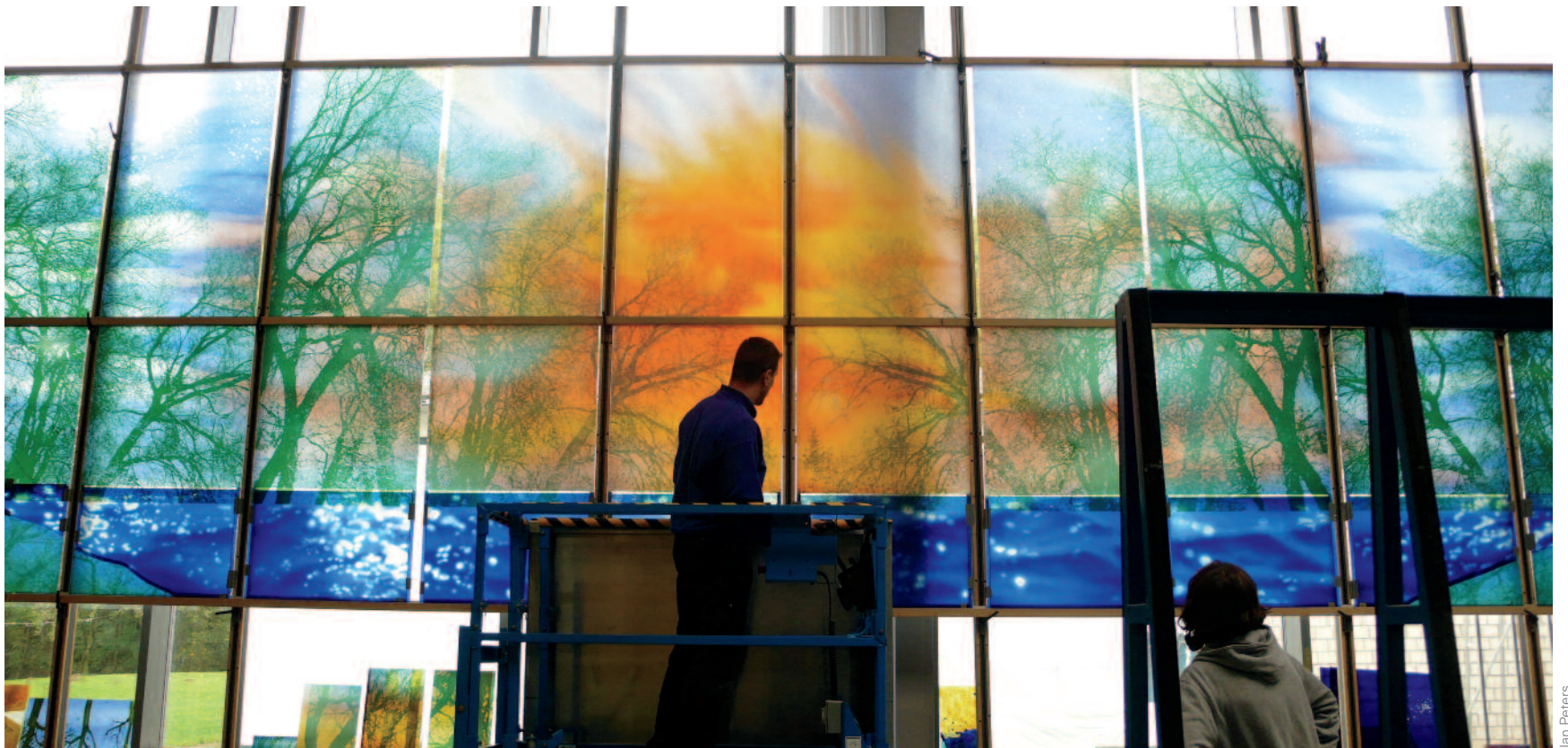
Sarah's *Incarnation* window brings the specificity and beauty of the Incarnation before us, but without using human figures. In designing the window, she asked "how the birth of Christ could be communicated in this place," and settled on the birth of light as an image for God's coming. Sarah's use of light to depict Incarnation resonates most profoundly with the words of St. Paul: "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6).

The Lux Gloria of the Incarnation that pours through the central panels of the window mirrors the splendour of Saskatchewan skies at dawn and dusk. Just as the Old Testament covenants are each accompanied by a sign, this window invites



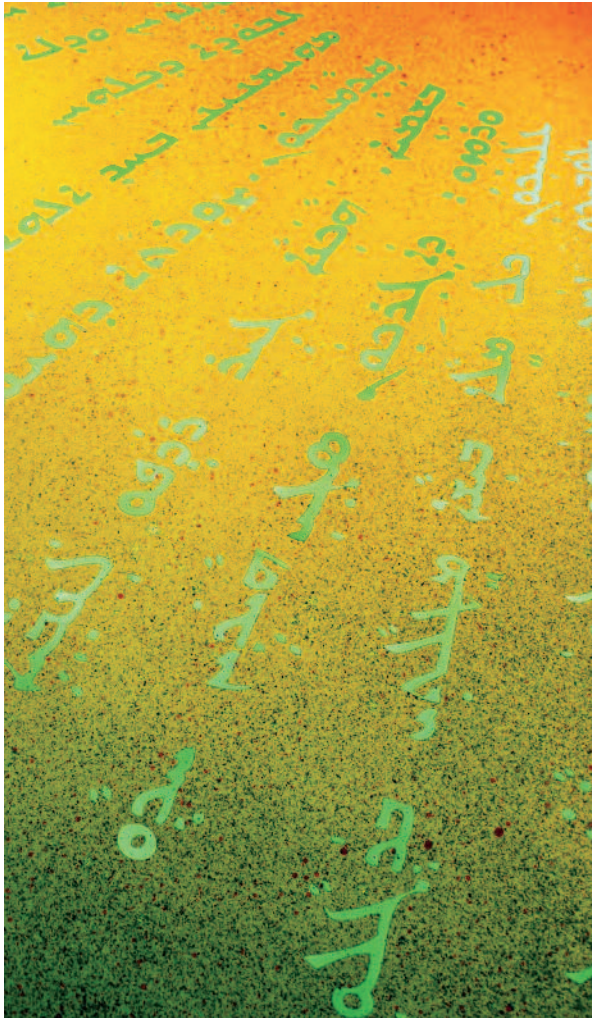
Incarnation window
in progress at the
studio and detail of
tree from the site,
Cathedral of the Holy
Family, Saskatoon, SK
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Details,
Resurrection
 window
 showing Aramaic
 (the language
 of Jesus)
 proclamation
 of the Kingdom
 ✦ 2011 b



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us to see the daily glory of our prairie skies as the reminder of the new covenant initiated with Jesus' birth and sealed with his dying and rising.

The river at the bottom centre of the *Incarnation* window is intended as a symbol of baptism, while the sphere in the central panes is suggestive of Christ's Incarnation as the Eucharist lifted over the created world.

While the flood waters of the *Covenant* window are being held back, the calm water of the *Incarnation* window draws us forward. The way in which the banks of the river angle down towards the centre on either side gives a sense that the water is channelling down to us in the assembly. This water is inviting, luminous from the sphere of light which hovers over it.

The imagery of the sanctuary windows moves from a somewhat metaphorical representation in the *Covenant* window to realistic imagery much more directly reflective of nature in the *Incarnation* window. It is our world that Christ is entering into here: our river and trees, our earth and sky. The trees are not covered with leaves, but they are in bud, ready to burst forth. It is as though all of creation is fertile, sparkling, rejoicing, in this window: God's glory filling earth and sky.

When Sarah Hall first came to Saskatoon, in May 2009, at the invitation of the planning and worship committee for the proposed cathedral, she was invited to what would become the building site. It was a big open space, with a sports field and a little grove of elm trees on the property, and didn't look terribly promising. Neither were the funds in place yet. But this group of prairie folk seemed to have a strong determination that a cathedral was indeed going to be built, on that very site, so she took out her camera and took photographs of the area, including the grove of trees. A slim and very busy two and a half years later, Sarah was back in Saskatoon for the installation of the windows in December 2011. She pointed to the trees on the *Incarnation* window, and said, "those are the trees that were on the property here then; the water in the window is your Saskatchewan River." As Sarah's window reminds us, it is to this world, with these particular trees, this familiar river, that God comes.

Resurrection

When Sarah Hall began designing the stained glass windows of the sanctuary, she started with the *Resurrection* window, situated above the main altar. Coming in the main entrance to the cathedral, one's eyes naturally follow the path of stone from the baptismal font up to the altar, to the cross behind it, and up to the magnificent colours and light of the window. It proclaims: this is a place where People of the Resurrection assemble; here the love of God prevails. We don't always live up to the high calling of that message, but the window summons us anew.

Sarah related that the committee had wanted the *Light of the Resurrection* window behind the altar, as the central focus; and in starting there, she needed to think through how the whole would work together. "I thought of it as a celestial story," she noted, reflecting the height of the windows, "and asked myself how the story of salvation could be told up there with prairie light and living skies, just as it was told and enacted on ground level through the liturgy."

In the central panels of the window, the bright oranges and yellows of the sphere in the *Incarnation* window here break forth from a radiant sun-like circle of light, sweeping joyous colour in all directions, filling everything. Aramaic text – the language Jesus spoke – emanates from the centre in rays of light. The text includes parts of the Sermon on the Mount, including the Beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer, and the call to love God with all one's heart and soul and strength, and one's neighbour as oneself; and also includes the Apostles' Creed, an early and concise expression of Christian faith.

The window is an unambiguous proclamation that love is victorious. While the cross is not explicitly present in the window, on either side of the central panels, a trunk or branch of a tree grows, springing forth with new foliage, suggesting that the tree of death has become a tree of life.

The external panels show the wind and flame of Pentecost, rich veins of red and orange spreading like a forest fire, a fire which leaves not a trail of ashes, but a landscape enlivened, transformed and transfigured by the breath of God. From the green branches come windblown leaves, suggestive of the apostolic community who are caught up in the movement of the Holy Spirit, and being carried with grace – a reflection of the early Christian community described in the Acts of the Apostles, who heal and preach in Jesus' name, and witness to what they have seen and heard.

Faith in the Resurrection changes something profound in the believer, yet we live in a world which is still broken and in need of redemption, a brokenness and need for redemption we also feel within ourselves most days. At the bottom of the *Resurrection* window, there is a thin strip of green, with a river meandering through it; the light of the Risen Lord and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit hover above, but their colours do not seep down into this ribbon of green, and we might also locate ourselves there in the window.

The passages from chaos to creation, from slavery to freedom, from death to life, depicted in these windows, are unfinished until they are accomplished in each one of us and in our world. Sarah notes that she wasn't intending so much to communicate the Resurrection as an event of the past, but as the experience of 2,000 years of Resurrection light pouring down upon us, renewing us one day at a time.



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Glory

It may be helpful to think of the *Glory* window as a parable told in stained glass. It uses not words but image, line and texture, tint and hue, angles of light and streams of colour as its forms in trying to evoke the biblical promise of life in God's presence, Lux Gloria. When the early morning sun, unimpeded by clouds, beams through this large east-facing window, it floods the cathedral with glorious light. Again, we sense the artist at play here in the fields of the Lord, to awaken our imaginations.

Sarah Hall noted that in focusing on God's glory, she did not want to design an imaginary world which sought to depict the end of time, but rather, she wanted to show our world transformed by being brought into the fullness of God's presence. The *Glory* window contains elements from all the previous windows, but now showing them transfigured as eternity breaks into our here and now.

At the heart of the *Glory* window is a cross, which is filled with water. The cross has given birth to a tree of life, which fills the central panes. The window presents the tree of life with a childlike simplicity and joy; birds find shelter there, and there is room for everything in it. It has a shape which is metaphorical, not literal. Its leaves are like those which were being blown about in the *Resurrection* window, and are kindred to the many-coloured flames of the burning bush in the *Covenant* window. Sarah used textured "baroque" glass for the tree. In direct sun, it's as though the light is fractured or splintered, broken open in the same way that the Paschal Mystery breaks open space and time.

Sarah has imprinted the prairie skies on each of the sanctuary windows. Spread out on a wider canvas in the *Glory* window, it is as though the colours are being slowly swirled by the Holy Spirit, transfiguring the prairie skies in sheltering swaths above and around the tree of life. The local trees of the *Incarnation* window

Resurrection window in progress at Glasmalerei Peters, Paderborn, Germany
 ✦ 2011 b

are also present here, joining the skies in proclaiming that it is the world we know and love which is being caught up in God's glory.

As in the *Covenant* window, a row of candles of various shapes and sizes runs across the bottom of the *Glory* window. This time around, the candles are all white, celebratory, exuding an energetic joy as their flames bask in the glory of all the wonder going on above and around them. As one visitor to the cathedral said recently, "those candles and birds are just loving life." The vertical candles stand beneath the water in the horizontal part of the cross, arranged so that the water of the Paschal Mystery seems to pour its grace upon the candles, and water the land.

Klaus and Sarah with the *Glory* window in progress at the studio ↻ 2011 b

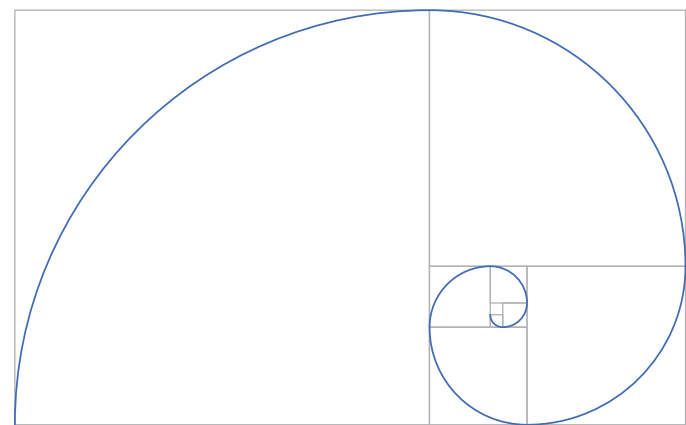


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Both in the *Covenant* window and here, the candles — representing us human beings — speak a strong note of freedom. In the *Covenant* window, they represent a people being brought out of the land of Egypt, into freedom. In the *Glory* window, they serve as reminder that God's Kingdom is constituted of free human beings, who have been won over by God's love, and rejoice in being in a free loving relationship with God.

When we cultivate attentiveness to the present, there will be graced moments where the line between time and eternity seems particularly thin. At the intersection of time and eternity, we have glimpses of glory which tap us into the joy which is etched into creation and infused by the Holy Spirit. The *Glory* window invites us to be on the lookout.

As the *Glory* window contains elements of the other windows, so too does it draw together the mystery that each has spoken. These windows have as their subject matter the themes that, from a Christian perspective, are the worthiest of our attention and our pondering. From one vantage point, these are the themes that are to direct our Christian lives, to shape their meaning and to guide their actions. From another perspective, these windows and the reflections they evoke from us are an exploration into the mind and heart of God. We in the Diocese of Saskatoon are delighted and proud to have Sarah Hall's windows gracing this cathedral, where we may contemplate the glory of God shining through them.



Donald Bolen is the Archbishop of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Regina. He was the Bishop of Saskatoon at the time the Cathedral of the Holy Family was being built and its windows and mosaic by Sarah Hall were installed. In addition to pastoral work and teaching, he worked at the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in Rome from 2001 to 2008, and continues to serve on national and international ecumenical dialogues.

Excerpted from *Transfiguring Prairie Skies – Stained Glass at Cathedral of the Holy Family*, 2012, reprinted with permission from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon.



Top: Exterior view showing *Glory* and *Resurrection* windows, Cathedral of the Holy Family, Saskatoon, SK ✦ 2011 b

Bottom: *Glory*, Cathedral of the Holy Family, Saskatoon, SK ✦ 2011 b



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