

## Saskatchewan Prayer Breakfast

April 6<sup>th</sup> 2016

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Greetings to Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor, our elected provincial and federal members, the civil servants of fire, police, school, and clergy who keep this city protected, distinguished guests, Prayer Breakfast friends.

A warm congratulations to those of you newly elected and to Premier Brad Wall for a resounding vote of confidence from your province. The Ontario media describes you as CAPTAIN SASKATCHEWAN! So Premier Wall, the people have spoken, and at this gathering, you will be front of mind as this crowd lifts Saskatchewan up for prayer. This gathering is about planting the seeds of faith in your province.

I remember interviewing Premier Wall for our TV program and I have always remembered what he said about the meditative drive from his office at the legislative building to home in Swift Current. The car was at that time, a sanctuary for you.

I don't know if it's just me, or did anyone wonder why go through the electoral process again if everything was just fine? What democracy does is it gives us structured space to evaluate the evidence – the issues, the money, the stories, the dilemmas. These all require discussion, review, remembering, and of course, these are the stories that help people make a decision on what the future will be. In the process of an election, we reaffirmed what we valued. Politics is action – I, too, am an activist from another tribe; one that looks for and evaluates evidence of God.

I always feel as an Easterner that I need to slink back in to Saskatchewan. You all have a great reputation for being the moral fiber of our country. On Bay St in Toronto, it is a plus if your resume says you are from Saskatchewan. The East knows you as tough people who moved a province from have not, to have; from being the bread basket to the jobs basket. Saskatchewan gives the nation food, fuel, fertilizer, and faith. We get that. But if I can just wave the Toronto flag a bit, we once brought Saskatchewan a dream.

John Lake was an 1881 Methodist minister in Toronto who awoke one night from a dream where he felt God had told him to head west, to build a city for God. Remarkably, in less than two years, Reverend Lake raised \$4 million out of Toronto for this venture. With his colony of devout believers in Jesus, he took the cash, and went as far as he could by rail – to the end of the line, which was Moose Jaw. And then Reverend Lake and his temperance colony dreams headed north by wagon until he encountered Chief Whitecap, who said “Build this city of your dreams here, on our land....”

If we read Reverend Lake's early sermon from that settlement, we hear the dream for a place of refreshing of God to happen to a diverse group of people. Chief Whitecap and Reverend Lake worked together in harmony, with two distinct spiritual teachings and created a phenomenal city we know as Saskatoon. See their statue by the riverbank at the Arts Center.

Well I can't tell you much about food, fuel, and fertilizer that you export to our nation, but I can tell you about the faith. I am a product of faith in God that found its roots in Saskatchewan. But before I get into my personal story with Saskatchewan, I want to give you just a snapshot of why our faith stories need activism.

I work for a charity whose mission is to communicate the Christian story using news and current events with media. The greatest idea in history is that humanity can be reconciled to a loving God. When that happens to an individual, a person is united to a new idea – God in us. God imported into an individual, the Savior of the world shaping our imagination. It brings hope, it brings integrity, it brings self-control, it brings the social capital of love for our neighbor, it puts your life straight. It brings emotional healing; it brings good gifts to our lives. God is an invitation to love.

We have a history of stories that remind us that God is always in communication with people, and real change and transformation happens as a result. Your location is actually very important for finding the spiritual realities you need in life. There are many mysteries about God, but what we do know is that God does work in physical time, and physical space through real people. The history of religion will tell us that. Our own experiences confirm it. So where you are planted, the people, the family, the job, the physical reality of our lives, you will experience God. Embedded in our personal stories, is where the Spirit of God visits us.

Like in history, as in Holy Scripture, the stories of God are always rooted in people, places, geography, and time. Always what we know of God comes to us through people and God interacting. It is so important we recall that God is a communicator with people.

Mark 4 shows how generous God is with wanting those ways to be known. The picture we get is that God is like a farmer, generously sowing and throwing seeds out on the ground, some on soil fertile, some not. Or like light – a cover is lifted, light shines everywhere, just a small light, and darkness recedes. God is patient, patient for a purpose. He puts a tiny seed into the ground, and with enough time, a huge tree results. As God moves, God does it in physical time, and physical space through real people. God is an activist God – not content to ignore humanity – God’s love compels action, and we hear that action in the stories we speak of our faith.

In the spring of 2010, I was at a thoughtful moment in my working life as a journalist. I was walking down John Street, part of Canada’s media village, and I was absorbed in the bustle of the street. As I crossed King, then Adelaide, I was stopped in my tracks by the site of the Bell Media building, and eight blocks of youth who were lined up around the corner, waiting for Much Music Tickets. The cultural power of that sight caught my imagination. I knew a different story of this building. The Bell Media building was called the Wesley Building when it was built in 1913 by the Methodist Church of Canada. It was intended to be the Methodist Book and Publishing House, which printed Bibles for Canada. Engraved in the Wesley building’s gothic architecture are books and sheaves of wheat on each of its corners.

I felt the Holy Spirit speak to me in that location while I was walking down John Street in 2010. It was an invitation, a presence felt audibly in my imagination that God was asking for a media home to be created again in Toronto’s downtown core. The idea that began to grow from that walk down John Street was to secure a place for this task of Christian story telling in media at 250 Front Street, in the facilities of the CBC’s Broadcast Centre.

This is our charity’s response to Matthew 5:16 where Jesus says “Let your light shine”. Our work is in the public eye. My colleague Sandy Broad and our President Jeff Groenewald are here with me and we’re delighted to be your guests, Please meet us after for a greeting time in the New Brunswick Room next door. As we look for evidence of God to speak about in media, we have been sobered by the latest Angus Reid/Bibby poll about what Canadians believe. You may have booming places of worship in Saskatchewan , but overall the numbers of people attending religious services, even monthly, continue to decline, and half of all Canadians say they aren’t sure if they need faith or not. What is increasing is a polarizing narrative between those who don’t believe and those who do.

Just 50 % of Canadians have a positive perception of Catholic Canadians, only 30 % have a positive perception of Canadian evangelicals, and only 15 % have a positive perception of Canadian Muslims. I am an evangelical Christian – it means I believe the Bible, I believe that my life was repaired through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and I believe that church community. I personally attend a CMA church, my background is Mennonite. I believe my neighborhood church is where I learn and grow, and discover how to make life here on earth beautiful. I’m alarmed that 70% of Canadians would find this faith suspect. I pray the media we create can be part of changing that attitude, and we can tell how the Spirit of God visits us through the personal stories in our lives, in our places, geography, and time. Always, what we know of God comes to us through people and God interacting. So how did that happened in my life?

My parents were from first-generation Russian settlers north of Saskatoon. My mother is from Aberdeen, my father is from Hague, but they moved east to Ontario to cash in on the auto industry long before I was born. In 1984, I was a young bride with a husband freshly graduated out of Manitoba teacher’s college and my husband Vern got a job offer north of Saskatoon from Rosthern Junior College, which, by the way, was where my father attended as a teen. So a young couple, we moved into the back suite of the boys’ dorm at that school, and began a remarkable life. I had come out of city TV reporting in Manitoba, and thought I’d like to try my hand at print writing. It was the Saskatoon Star Phoenix that gave me a Saturday faith column in their papers.

Week after week, I learned and then put into print, how God had moved in people’s imaginations to affect their actions; I wrote stories of building to the better – social needs and discoveries. But the big news for me was that our first child was born in Rosthern, and it was a very formative time in my life. I will always remember an elderly neighbour who came to say hello when we first arrived. She did the small talk and then got down to the core of the community when she asked, "Will you be going to church?" At the time, I didn’t have a clue which church I might look into. So she took me to hers and I realized that many in Saskatchewan grow their values through the framework of Christianity. Most importantly, at the most fundamental time of

my husband and I setting our values, in a community where we were new, at a stage in our life that would shape the trajectory of our lives, God used a person, and place, to direct us to God's love for our lives. My friend Ruby and our country church in Waldheim were planting seeds.

The faith education in that church grounded us. If you cannot put your belief in God into language, it loses. It is not enough to simply be a good person; you need to know why you are in relationship with Jesus Christ. Those seeds for us were planted in Saskatchewan.

Then in 1986, my husband started to be intrigued with an entrepreneurial Saskatchewan food franchise, The Yellow Submarine, at the time Canada's fastest growing new food franchise. It made gourmet pizza that you took uncooked out of the store and cooked at home. Well, we bought into this Saskatchewan baking idea, and looked for the largest rural center for people who needed to take home raw pizza to bake in their country homes. That was the Yellow Submarine, and we bought the franchise to Steinbach, Manitoba. It was a great business for us, and we were just so happy. We sold that submarine before it sank us, but even that was a venture shaped by our faith.

For people who are "Christ followers", life on earth is affected by God-inspired activity and they do believe government is a gift from God for the betterment of our lives and it should be worked on. Recently, I interviewed Rabbi Howard Sacks. He spoke of the big questions: Who am I? Why am I here? How shall I live? Science, technology, the market, and politics cannot provide answers, so we will always turn back to religion. We have a history of stories that give evidence that God is always in communication with people, and physical things happen as a result. Lives are affected. The reality of God's goodness for human life is brought closer.

Last week, your prominent author from Saskatchewan, Yann Martel, was with us in interview. His books, *Life of Pi*, and now *The High Mountains of Portugal* have led us deeply into an imagination inspired by faith in God. The *Life of Pi* the hero follows three religions; in *High Mountains*, the author crafts a story of three grieving men following the story of Christ. The ape is the Christ figure in this latest book and I asked Yann why he has turned to religion as such a theme for inspiring our imaginations. He said, "So where you are planted, the people, the family, the job, the physical reality of our lives, are embedded in those stories, the Spirit of God visits you. Like in history, the stories of God are always rooted in people, places, geography, and time.

I'd like to suggest that later you Google the Biblical book of Mark, chapter 4, and read it in *The Message*. The Message is an easy-reading version for busy people like us, and in Mark 4, Jesus is teaching, and says, insight into God's ways is important. Mark 4 shows how liberal God is with wanting those ways known: like a sower generously throwing seeds out on good and bad ground; like light, a cover is lifted, light shines everywhere. God is patient; a tiny seed put into the ground results in a huge tree. Mark 4 continues, "With many stories like these, Jesus presented his message to them, fitting the stories to their experience and maturity. When he was alone with this disciple, he went over everything, sorting out the tangles, untying the knots."

Saskatchewan is not a theocracy, never has been, even with a heritage like Tommy Douglas' faith-filled government in its history. I do think that the Saskatchewan disciplines of perseverance, love, and sticking to a task are fruits of faith that have spread to our whole country like the wide blue sky over the prairies. There is a compelling witness here that Christian values continue to be a treasured part of Saskatchewan's asset and it's hard to argue with the blessings of that.

God bless you as you export this faith all over our country.