

*And what is the name of this child?* It's a question we ask during baptism. What is the story behind your name? For myself, Allan was a unique name in the Saunders household. All the other names, including my middle name, came from earlier generations of our family.

However, my given name comes, not from blood relatives, but from a family in a congregation in which my father was the minister. There had been two children – a boy and a girl – but before he had reached school age the boy had died. My parents asked if their newborn son might be named after him – and that is how I got my name. It marked the beginning of a deep bond between the two families. Whenever I need to remind myself of who I am and what I am supposed to be doing with my life, I just need to recall that story of my beginnings.

Beginnings are important. And they come to us in every stage of life. They tell us who we are. Often they also tell us where we are going in this life.

The Bible has a story about the beginning – in fact, that's how the Bible itself begins. It goes like this: *In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep. Then a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.* What a scene! God sets down in the midst of a formless darkness. God gazes into the water that would not or could not bear life, and from this face-to-face encounter, a sensible world begins. God orders chaos. What a beautiful beginning!

Many scholars believe that this story of beginnings in Genesis 1 was written down during the exile of the Israelites in Babylon. What that implies is that this is not the oldest story in the Bible, so it must be placed first for some other reason. David Lewicki thinks the reason is that this kind of beginning story is what we need. It's the most important kind of beginning, a story that shows us God staring down chaos and making beauty. When the world seems in shambles, when we ourselves feel trapped or lost and abandoned, whenever any of us is desperate for a new beginning, we have this story. We have a Creating God who reshapes the chaos into order and beauty.

A mistake people often make when reading the Bible is that they think that the Bible only has one beginning. In fact, it's a book that has dozens of beginnings, probably thousands, and many of them echo this same theme. God creates order and beauty out of chaos. That's not a bad way to think about when John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness. He demands that people rise up to take responsibility for their lives and for the state of the world. John didn't show up in a world where everything was going fine. There was state-sponsored violence, greed and exploitation. John showed up there, standing in the waters of the Jordan calling upon people to see the chaos around them and to make a change.

Then Jesus wades in next to him. Can you focus your mind's eye on that moment? Can you see that instant there in the rippling waters of the Jordan, when Jesus stands and looks down and sees his own reflection on the face of the deep? It was creation happening all over again! The spirit wind blew down that river, as John scooped up the water and poured it over Jesus' head. A voice broke the silence, "You are my child, with you I am well pleased."

And just as before, there was light in the darkness. As it was in the beginning, here God was in the world, wresting order from chaos. This time it was by proclaiming good news to the poor and release to every captive.

When Jesus was baptized, the Spirit of God came upon him: the same spirit that first hovered over creation; the same spirit that filled the prophets with boldness and authority. By the power and spirit of God within him, Jesus turned water into wine, stilled the storm, cured the lepers, healed the deaf and blind, drove out evil spirits, and spoke with authority.

Baptism reminds us that this same spirit also is available to you and me. This same spirit can give each of us empower us in the face of whatever we encounter: to face challenges within your relationships; to face a parent's aging or our own physical decline; to face the challenges we meet in the workaday world.

And sometimes it is absolutely amazing how God brings goodness and beauty out of hopeless and disturbing situations. When Susan Sparks went to volunteer at Mother Teresa's orphanage, she writes: "What I saw stopped me short: three and four children in one crib, tiny toddlers tied to bedposts, children crying out with no one to comfort them. After a moment, I gathered my courage and slowly stepped across the threshold. That is when I encountered five-year-old Anna. Blind and deaf since birth, Anna could sense human presence from the vibrations of footsteps. As I walked by, she reached out and wrapped herself around my leg like a little koala bear. Not knowing what else to do, I sat down cross-leg beside her."

"She immediately crawled into my lap and began rocking back and forth, laughing and singing. I quickly discovered that her favourite game was to hum a short tune and then press her ear up against me, feeling the vibrations as I hummed it back. "...Here in the laughter of this tiny girl was humour and the Holy made manifest. By Western standards, she had nothing: no home, no family, barely enough food. Every day people came in and out of her life with no consistency and no promise of a home or permanence. Yet she greeted each person with the same smile and tiny outstretched arms." Beauty showing forth in the most unlikely circumstances.

When John and Jesus arrived, the earth had yet again become a void; shadows once again covered the face of the deep. But when God's Spirit moved on the face of the waters of the Jordan, God was making order and beauty through Jesus.

And when the earth lay in shadows, and his voice had been stilled and his body had been laid in a tomb, on the third day he arose. Easter declares there is no disorder that the love of God cannot remake, there is no chaos that God's love cannot turn into something beautiful.

When have been the times of new beginnings for you? When did the Spirit of God hover over the chaos of your life? When did that Spirit call you by name, and deliver you into a good and meaningful place?

Beginnings matter. They tell who we are--and whose we are. No matter what the situation, life can begin again.