

“In the Father’s Name”

God’s covenant with Israel of old was marked by circumcision. The Lord promises that He will be their God, and they will be His people. And on the eighth day, every male child was circumcised. Also on that day the child was given his name.

The child is marked by circumcision as one who is of Israel – the covenant is God’s promise to them. They are one of Jacob’s son. Their name is – if you will – enrolled in Israel. And, last but not least, this covenant is marked by blood.

Zechariah and Elizabeth are of Israel – descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God had given them a promise – one specific for them – that Elizabeth “will bear you a son” – that “he will be great before the Lord” – that “he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

And now the time has come. The Lord’s Word does what it says – and His words are fulfilled in their time. “Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son.” And the joy and gladness the Lord had promised was theirs – and many rejoiced with them at the birth of their son. And on the eighth day they circumcised him.

But what about the name? How is he to be named? His father Zechariah cannot speak (you remember that – because he did not believe the Word of the Lord spoken to him by the angel). “They” would have called him Zechariah after his father. That seems right, proper – let him follow in the footsteps of his father.

But his mother said no – “His name is John.” John? Why John? The people “wondered” at this name – they were perplexed. “None of your relatives is called by this name.” Sure, the name John means “God is gracious” – and most certainly, the Lord has been gracious to Zechariah and Elizabeth.

His name is gracious, and perplexing. But how fitting it is that John is NOT named after his father – since John is to prepare the way for Jesus, who has no earthly father. No, the name given to him is not passed on to him by his father or grandfather – it is a name given to him by Our Father who art in heaven.

In the Rite of Holy Baptism the child is asked: “How are you named?” The parents give the name, the pastor speaks the child’s name – and says – “I baptized you in the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit.” And it is so. God’s Word does what it says. The child has been made a “disciple” of Jesus Christ – one who follows Him.

In Holy Baptism the child has been given the gift of God’s name – which means that the child belongs to Him – that the Lord who promises to dwell where He locates His name is with this child – and finally, that with the name of the Lord, the child has access to God, He can call upon Him in every trouble, pray, praise and give thanks.

Whether the child is named after his father, or not – he follows in his father’s footsteps. From our earthly fathers we inherit the sin and disobedience that plagues all who are born from our father Adam.

But “Our Father who art in heaven” gives new life to the baptized. He is given the new birth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. He is given the righteousness of his brother, Jesus. Or, as Zechariah says, that we, “being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days.”

Isn’t that what you desire for your children? That’s what Our Father desires for all people – so, He prepares the way. He gives Zechariah and Elizabeth the gift of a child – and through that child, John – baptism and repentance are preached to all people. The way is prepared for God’s only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ to come – to come and suffer and die for our sin and disobedience, to come and shed His blood for our salvation.

Zechariah sinned when he did not believe God's Word and promise. He didn't trust God to do what He had said. And so, Zechariah's mouth was closed and he was unable to speak. When asked, he is not able to say, "His name is John." God names this child, and Zechariah in turn, and in faith, praises God.

Fathers, do not be silent. You have great hopes and dreams for your children – but if you only pass on your name to your children – then they will only walk in the footsteps of your sin.

Proclaim to your children the name given them by their Father in heaven. Tell them that they belong to Christ. Pray that they would be "great in the sight of the Lord" – not because of what you have passed on to them, but because of the gifts which the Lord has graciously bestowed on them. For in the waters of Holy Baptism they are redeemed – they are washed – they are made holy.

John the Baptist came to prepare the way for the Savior who comes to us in the flesh. Open your mouths to tell your children that the Baby in the manger is truly God. Tell them that that same God-in-the-flesh Jesus comes to them today – in His Word, with His Baptism, at His Table.

Don't just remind them that they are your children – remind them that they are the children of Our Father. Pray the Our Father with your children, and with your children in mind. Lead them to the Word of God so that they might hear what is trustworthy and true.

And give thanks. Give thanks that God has blessed you with the wonderful gift of children – and give thanks that through the blood of Jesus, He has made them – and you – to be His very own.

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people."
Amen.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.