

# Letter to a Young Parent

Dear Grace and Alex,

Congratulations! Thanks be to God for the safe arrival of what sounds like a packed little bundle of hope: my goodness, 10 lbs., 6 oz.! It must be the milk there in Wisconsin.

Well, on behalf of the rest of us exhausted, grateful, and terrified inhabitants, let me welcome you to a strange new world: parenthood. This is going to be the hardest thing you've ever done, and it's worth every bit of the blood, sweat, and tears that are to come. You can't imagine that now. I understand. Soak up every ounce of joy and elation and starry-eyed wonder at the miracle of baby Liam. I'll be watching as the terror sets in. It's usually when you're headed out the hospital door and it hits you: "They're actually letting me take this little creature home? But I don't know what the hell I'm doing!" Yeah, get used to that.

But also remember this: in a few weeks, you're going to bring Liam forward for baptism. In that sacramental act, he is going to be tangibly marked with the sign of God's promises. That should be a first reminder that you're not in this alone—that Liam is being claimed by a promise-keeping Father who is even more faithful than you. There will be days and seasons when that will be an unspeakable comfort to you.

In the sacrament of baptism, not only will you claim God's promises, you'll be confessing that you alone are not able to raise Liam. The baptismal ceremony is, I think, a wonderful gift to parents who rightly approach their task with fear and trembling. For while you, in response to God's promise, will make promises to God about how you will raise Liam, the congregation will also make a promise—to come alongside you, to support you and nourish you, to sustain you all within the household of God that is bigger than the three of you. So baptism is a sign that our homes are open, interdependent households, not closed, nuclear units. Baptism signals that all of us—married or single, parent or child—are part of a larger household which is the church of

God, and together, that household has pledged to be one big community of godparents. When you run up against the challenges of parenting, don't be scared to remind the church of the promise it made to you.

I hope and pray that your labour as parents can be buoyed by these promises and this sense that your tiny, growing family will flourish just to the extent that you centre yourselves in the "first family," which is the church. You will need this, believe me. One of the terrible lies of our culture—and even the rhetoric of "family values"—is the crippling myth that our homes are self-sufficient incubators for child-rearing. If you buy into that myth, you'll be isolated by a constant sense of failure. For it won't take long to realize that you are not able to do this on your own, even though you're an intertwined team. If you've bought into the myth of the self-sufficient family, you also won't be willing to admit that you need help. Baptism is the church's way of signaling right from the get-go that we know you need help! We know you can't do this on your own. So we're not going to be surprised or disappointed or judgmental when you lean on us. We'll be there waiting. Why not get into the habit early?

Finally, while I don't mean to rain on the parade of your joy, I do feel compelled to share the bad news, too: Liam might break your heart. Actually, Liam is going to break your heart. Somehow. Somewhere. Maybe more than once. To become a parent is to promise you'll love prodigals. Indeed, some days parenting is exactly how God is going to teach you to love your enemies. Because there'll be days when a 17-year-old Liam is going to see you as the enemy, and all of a sudden you'll realize that the Sermon on the Mount is not about war and foreign policy, nor is it just pie-in-the-sky piety: instead, you'll hear those words anew and realize that in the command to love your enemies, Jesus is calling you to follow him as a parent, and sometimes even that task will look cruciform. It will require absorbing all Liam's misplaced animosity, all his confused attempts to figure out who (and whose) he is. At those moments, Jesus' call to lay down your life and take up the cross will have a mundane tangibility you could have never imagined. Some days, loving Liam is going to require you to turn the other cheek and absorb that heartbreak like a slap across the face. And it's then that you'll most want to remember the promises

of a faithful Father that trickled down his little forehead years ago.

But those painful moments will be overshadowed by a million others. You're going to think it's incredible when Liam smiles, or says "Mama," or rolls over on his tummy, but let me tell you, that won't even compare to the afternoon when, in what feels like an out-of-body experience, you realize you're having a conversation with this *man*—you might be sitting on the front porch talking about Mumford & Sons or Andy Warhol or World War II artillery, and for a moment you can hardly believe that the little bundle you brought home from the hospital has grown into this beautiful, mystifying, wonderful young man. And you realize that, in your son, God has given you one of your best friends in the whole world, and you try to suppress your smile while thinking to yourself, "Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you."

It's all worth it, Jamie