

## Motherhood in the Season of COVID



The COVID pandemic struck me at an odd time. I gave birth to our son, Charles Allen Ettenger, on his daddy's birthday, February 22nd at 9:06pm at St. Patrick's Hospital. After years of infertility, multiple invasive surgeries, a litany of fertility treatments, and two rounds of heartbreaking and sometimes soul crushing IVF, Charlie made his way into the world after 40 hours of labor and complications immediately after that nearly killed me. We had held onto our faith in God and our love for each other through it all, and he was finally here: our joy, wrapped up in an 8 pound bundle of squishy-faced, wriggling baby boy.

The next two weeks were a flurry of visitors and family, late night feedings and diaper changes and the tumult and exhaustion that comes with new parenthood. But - we had fought hard for it all, and took joy in every moment, and pride in our triumph over the greatest sorrow of our lives, the years of darkness and despair that are infertility, of wanting nothing more than a child and a family to love, and watching life go on everywhere for seemingly everyone else.

Then COVID struck. Already at home with a newborn, it seemed it would be a less daunting task to quarantine. Boy was I wrong. My husband George was deemed an "essential worker" meaning he would not be staying home with me. The helping hands and visitors, meals and coffee breaks and help around the house that had filled the first week of Charlie's life came to an abrupt halt. Everyday I would pull myself out of bed after possibly 3 hours of sleep at most, send George off to work in his mask, and spend the next 10 hours alone learning to feed and care for my baby in utter solitude: no visitors, no help, no one to talk to other than my 3 week old baby (as adorable as he was, not much for conversation). It was not the victory lap I had imagined, and all around me, the newness and triumph of this life were contrasted with the tragedy of the pandemic. Additionally, the frustrations of learning to be a mother - *what does that cry mean? is he hungry or tired? how do I get him into his bassinet without waking him up? is that rash normal? WHY WHY WHY won't he stop crying!?* - were ones I had to face alone, sometimes so exhausted and despairing that I - and not just Charlie - cried through it all.

Day by day though, I began to learn signals and signs, listening for what Charlie needed like trying to tune into the station on a radio without the static getting in the way. A blank stare meant tired (exhausted!), clenched fists meant hungry (starving!), and NO I did not need to change his diaper (and wake him up doing so) every 20 minutes. Mothering Charlie became a cure for the despair around me - despite the odds, Charlie had come into being. A miracle! Despite the odds, everyday I was succeeding as a mother - Charlie was growing and gaining weight and starting to smile and burble and look intently around. Despite the odds - we WOULD get through the dark days of COVID, together, turning desperately to listen to each other for what each of us needed to sustain and nourish life.

I have learned that survival via mothering is often just a series of checklists covering the basic needs of human life: hunger, warmth, comfort, sleep. Finding ways to provide those basic of basic needs to each other is a way to survive, day by day, nursing the fundamental demands that we all have as humans, and recognizing our humanity in each other by doing so.

Charlie is now a busy, chubby 3 month old. As the restriction to COVID have lifted, we have again connected with the people and support of our community around us. Though it is perhaps a bold move in the middle of this pandemic, we are looking forward to his baptism - the celebration of God and faith and new life in the midst of its counterpoint - later this summer.

- Elizabeth Ettenger