

THE FAMLET MONTHLY



Dear Family,

Probably the most common response I get from men who learn that I have four daughters is “How are you ever going to pay for all those weddings?” I get the question often enough that I should have come up with a stock reply long ago. I still don’t have one, but for the next several months it’s going to be, “I’m not sure, but I’m about to find out.”

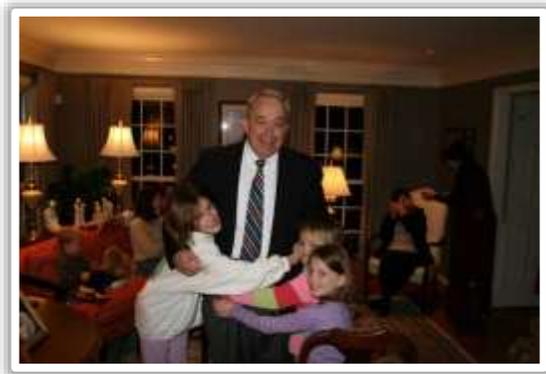
Hannah called on the Monday after Thanksgiving to tell us that she had become engaged to one John Thomas (JT) Embley of Williamsburg, Virginia. Like Hannah, JT is an undergraduate student at Brigham Young University, where the two of them met as freshmen a little over three years ago. They plan to be married on May 4th in the [Philadelphia Pennsylvania Temple](#) (because our local temple—the one in which Crystal and I were married—will have just begun [its two-year closure for renovation](#) at that time.) On a side note, I recently learned that our temple has inspired [a local beer](#), which you have to admit is pretty funny.

Hannah’s and JT’s ages (both 21) will seem young to many. They certainly seem young to me. I was, after all, a decidedly older man of 22 when I married Crystal Kent (who, at 23, was older still). But in reality, we were only older because the minimum age for missions was higher then. Crystal and I both completed our missions in the summer, got engaged sometime between Thanksgiving and Christmas, and were married the following May. Assuming she decides to go



Above: Sophie between her paternal grandparents, after receiving her patriarchal blessing from her grandpa.

Below: January 2008: Grandpa gets hugs from granddaughters Hannah, Lucy, and Abby after being ordained as a patriarch.



through with this thing, Hannah will have followed precisely the same path.

I'm told that upon learning of my engagement to Crystal some 24 years ago, a neighbor asked Mom if Crystal was pregnant. After all, what other reason could there be for marrying so young?

I have given some thought to this question in the weeks since learning of Hannah's engagement. One fairly obvious reason comes to mind, but there are subtler ones as well. The obvious one lies at the intersection of biology and religious conviction. Those outside our faith can be forgiven for their disbelief that we actually expect uncompromising adherence to the peculiar sexual ethics we profess—a standard that feels more divergent from the broader cultural norm with each passing year. But my experience has been that those who do adhere to them achieve a level of peace and happiness that those who choose not to adhere find elusive.

So there's that, but there's more to it than that. It comes, I think, from elements of our theology that instill in us a desire to define ourselves not primarily as individuals, but as unique links in something infinitely more important. Ultimately, regardless of how important we think our jobs are (and they're almost never as important as we make them out to be), the things we do in our families are of far greater and lasting consequence than anything we pursue alone. My sense is that most people (religious and non-religious) instinctively recognize this to be true. And if this is the case, then why not first lay the groundwork for a family and then build the less important things, like professional careers, around that, rather than the other way around?

I have heard a number of counterarguments to this and find all of them unpersuasive. Whether rooted in a belief in older people's enhanced ability to recognize "compatibility" (whatever that means) or a belief in the need to have first achieved some arbitrary level of "stability," the arguments for delaying marriage all seem to be premised on the view that marrying the "right" person is a function of clairvoyance about the future.

But my experience has been that most people aren't very good at that. A couple of 35 year olds may have a somewhat clearer view of their future than a couple of 21 year olds do, but certainly not a clear enough one to justify making a lifelong commitment. Marriage at any



Above and Below: Inside the U.S. Botanical Gardens – 28 December



age is an extraordinary act of faith—a willingness on the part of two people to covenant and promise to love, cherish, and honor each other no matter what happens. The fact that we vow to love each other now and in the future implies that love is a verb that we actively choose to do (or not do) as opposed to some abstract expression of sexual attraction that we involuntarily fall in and out of. A stable, comfortable income is not a prerequisite to making and keeping a covenant to love. If anything, it interferes with it.

Returning to the opening-paragraph question of how we're going to pay for all this, it appears a reception will be held somewhere around here on Saturday, May 5th—the day after the wedding. The precise location is TBD, in part because so many places one might rent for a wedding reception are already booked. With each successive day, more potential options are struck from the list and the likelihood grows of simply hosting the reception at the church. Using the church is free, and so I have a fairly compelling financial interest to stall.

Our bishop has taken to actively rooting for us to pursue the inexpensive, use-the-church option. Like us, he and his wife have four daughters. (Unlike us, they also have three sons.) Their four oldest are roughly the ages of our four, and the bishop has expressed some interest in our setting a budget-conscious precedent. I have no intention of letting him down. Stay tuned for more details.

JT has been here since Friday. The two of them are very cuddly, kiss and smile at each other a lot, and generally make me want to throw up. Tomorrow they will take the train to Williamsburg and subject the Embleys to their affectionate displays for a couple of days. Hannah will be back here midweek and the two of them will return to Utah next weekend for the start of winter semester.

He strikes me as a good boy—an “earnest young man,” one might say, who sings in choirs, plays the cello, and pursues an eclectic variety of other nerdy interests. I don't know that that characterization is 100 percent accurate (I don't know him that well, yet) but I don't think he'd object to it. He is appropriately frightened of me, as I initially was of my future father-in-law.

There is very little chance that JT is actually worthy of my daughter, but that's okay. I've never been worthy of Rod Kent's daughter, either, and he's never been anything but kind, patient, and magnanimous with me. I hope to be able to pay that forward in some manner.



Above: Four sisters and the Capitol Christmas Tree.

Below: Lucy, Crystal, Sophie, and an anonymous photobomber inside the National Aquarium.



I keep thinking that I would feel more at ease about all this if only I could know the future—but I suppose it's equally likely that I wouldn't. Whatever happens, I have come to terms with the reality that we are compelled to live life one choice at a time. And this choice, while not mine to make, increasingly feels right to me.

The Christmas season seemed to blow through faster than usual, as almost everything does in hindsight. For the second or third consecutive year (I've lost count—it could be longer) I failed to get around to hanging any lights on the outside of the house. The large box containing them sat outside the doorway to my office for at least three weeks, ensuring that I would kick, trip over, and occasionally swear at them at least twice a day. I observed this important holiday tradition for most of December before finally hauling the box back up to the attic a few days before Christmas. Tomorrow we will begin (and hopefully complete) the annual process of de-Christmasing the inside of the house, thus returning it to its baseline level of non-December clutter. At some point during this endeavor, assuming history holds, Crystal and I will ask each other why we have all this junk and why we subject ourselves to this annual exercise. Neither of us will have a particularly satisfying answer, but I suspect we'll do it all again next year.

Possibly resulting from years of dashed expectations, the girls didn't ask for much for Christmas. Sophie's wish list consisted of, and I quote, "I don't know—pullover sweaters, a spiral notebook, a pencil case, some pens, and maybe a fun mug." Sometimes I feel like I've built my entire professional career around establishing very low expectations and then exceeding them. It's nice to know that I've also managed to do that with Christmas. In addition to fulfilling all of my girls' most outlandish Christmas fantasies (*including* Sophie's very own spiral notebook) Santa also brought the girls our family's first drone. We're still working out some of the finer points of flying it—including how to make it turn—and so our neighbors' privacy is safe for now.

I suspect Sophie might tell you that the best thing she got for Christmas was her patriarchal blessing. She received it on Christmas Eve from her grandfather (who, remarkably, delivered the transcription to Sophie on Christmas Day—an unheard-of level of



efficiency among patriarchs for which Dad undoubtedly credits Mom, who drafts all his blessing transcriptions).

Only a tiny fraction of the 290 such blessings Dad has given in the decade since [being ordained a patriarch](#) have gone to his lineal descendants. I don't know whether those feel any different to him (it seems like they'd have to) but they've certainly been special to us.

Sophie's patriarchal blessing prompted me to dig out my own, which I had not read in several years, and which I also received in December—29 years ago when I was just a little older than Sophie. It was a pleasant reminder that I am known to God and that he cares what happens to me and to everyone else. Christmas is another reminder of that awe-inspiring truth, which I guess is why we're ultimately happy to endure all the extraneous baggage associated with this time of year.

May you find peace and happiness in the new year.

Love, Tim