

Five Little Souls in Heaven

by Ellie Hrkach



From the time I was very young I knew I wanted to have a large family. I remember when I was nine or ten years old, I had ten little dolls with names and personalities. I pretended I was grown-up and had ten children. I used to dream about it even when I was a teenager. When I first met my husband, James, one of the most important questions I had to ask him was, "How many children do you think you'd like to have?" His answer was a typical James answer: "I don't know -- four or five, I guess."

So when we decided to plan our first pregnancy several years later, we were thrilled to think we could possibly be creating a new life and impatiently waited to see if I would miss my period. I never expected to have any problems since I never used any form of artificial birth control (we use and teach Natural Family Planning), never had any sexually transmitted diseases and never had any indication there would be any trouble.

Two weeks after we actively sought a pregnancy, my temperature was still elevated and no period came. We were ecstatic, though a bit scared to think we would be parents. I had waited a long time to actually have a baby and now it seemed to be coming true. However, three days later, I started to bleed. "Oh, no," I said, "this can't be happening." The doctor said it was probably just my period, though I knew differently. "I've got 18 days of elevated temperatures and the temperature is not going down." The doctor was rather patronising and just said not to worry about it.

I knew something was wrong, though. By now, the pregnancy test was positive and I was still bleeding. Several more doctors said that I was having a miscarriage and that "if it's going to happen, it's going to happen."

It still didn't seem right. I finally went to a young intern who listened, looked at my NFP charts, and sent me to a specialist. Several days later, I was in the hospital having surgery to remove an ectopic pregnancy from my right tube, while leaving the tube in place. (An ectopic pregnancy is when the baby implants somewhere other than the uterus and has no chance for survival.) "It's funny," said the anesthesiologist. "You had placental tissue in the uterus which means you had a baby there too, which miscarried." I didn't think it was funny. Two babies.

Though my life had been spared, I felt an emptiness for the children I would never know. The little soul that was taken from my tube had a beating heart and was a perfect baby. Did I do some thing wrong by having that operation? These questions were answered by a priest who was also a good friend. He assured me that the removal of an ectopic pregnancy was not morally wrong because the baby cannot

grow and survive in the tube and that if the baby had not been removed, I would probably have died.

As well as the grief and guilt there was another emotion - uncertainty. The surgeon told me I may not be able to have children, and that women who have had ectopic pregnancies tend to have more of them. "But one baby did make it to the uterus," I said. That gave me a measure of hope.

I spent a lot of time in the hospital praying and reflecting on what had happened. I wanted so desperately to be a mother. I thought about the two little souls that I had conceived and carried for a short time. I prayed to God that He would baptise those babies and take care of them in heaven for me. I prayed that He would someday bless us with more children.

Several months later, we tried again for a pregnancy and prayed that God would bless us with a baby. When it was time for my period to come, no period came, my temperature was still elevated and I started to have morning sickness. We were thrilled, and prayed that the baby would be in the right spot. Three weeks later, the ultrasound confirmed that the baby was in the uterus and growing nicely.

When our son, Joshua, was born nearly six and a half years ago, James and I cried with joy. I was a mom and he was a dad and we had this beautiful baby. I was sure he was going to be that perfect baby I had always dreamed about. However, he was to be one of the biggest challenges we have ever faced. For the first three months he did little but cry (scream is a more appropriate word). He slept no more than 20 minutes at a time until he was nearly six months old. He had screaming fits that lasted for hours into the night. No, this was not that perfect baby I had dreamed about, but, more importantly, he was a baby who needed our love and affection.

A year and a half later, we became pregnant again. This time, there was very little morning sickness and when our son, Benjamin, was born in September of 1989, he was a quiet, sleepy baby who nursed every four hours and slept long periods at night. With this baby we tried to avoid answering "Yes" too quickly whenever anyone asked, "Is he a good baby?"

When Ben was 18 months old, we became pregnant a fourth time. Because I had had two normal pregnancies, I was confident this would be the same. Seven weeks into the pregnancy, I suffered a miscarriage. Again, we grieved.

At this point, we had conceived five babies in four pregnancies: one tubal pregnancy, two miscarriages and two live births. Though I had two beautiful little boys, I still felt a strong desire to have more children. Three months later, we again became pregnant. Right from the beginning it was obvious that it wasn't a normal pregnancy. My temperature was moderately high, but I began bleeding at the outset. My first thought was, "Oh God, please don't ask me to give up another baby." (This pregnancy turned out to be an ectopic pregnancy; the doctors think the baby died on its own and then was expelled out the end of the tube.)

During this short fifth pregnancy, I neglected my prayer life. I kept refusing what God was asking. I kept denying what was happening. At times, I even neglected Josh and Ben. I was depressed for weeks. I would see women with newborns or pregnant women and my eyes would start filling up with tears. My depression turned to anger. "It's not fair. I want more children and I may not be able to have more." I felt angry at all the people who got themselves sterilized, who threw God's gift of fertility away. I felt angry at God and I was not an easy person to live with.

James was sensitive and understanding for the most part, but he was losing patience with me. One night after the boys were in bed, he sat me down and said, "We need to talk." He tried to help me focus on the problem. "Ellie, I think you need to focus on God, not on yourself. We need to start praying more." He reminded me that being open to God's will meant being open not only to having a large family, but to also having a small family, if that was what God had planned. It seemed to me that perhaps I had been trying to choose what I thought God should plan for me, instead of seeking and accepting His actual will.

Over the next few months, I gradually went from an attitude of resistance to one of complete acceptance of God's will. I began to pray more and to read the Bible. One day, I came to Luke's gospel passage about the Annunciation. Without hesitation, Mary said "Yes" to God. "Be it done to me according to Your Word." Those words seemed to jump out at me. I finally understood what I needed to do. I needed to "let go and let God."

During this time we had been actively trying for a pregnancy and each month I had my period. Several months went by and I began to accept that perhaps we might not have any more children. Then, once again, we became pregnant. Several days later, I began to realize that God wasn't just giving in to what I wanted. He was asking me to suffer. I now had two small children (ages four and two) to care for and I was sick much of the time with nausea and migraine headaches. And yet, in the end, it was what I wanted.

Seven months later, our third son, Timothy, was born. We rejoiced and welcomed him into our family. When Timmy was 10 months old, I started to experience some signs of fertility. This seemed rather early to be getting my fertility back because I was still breast feeding quite a bit and he had only just started on solids. So I fully expected to have a period several days later. No period came. Since I hadn't been taking my temperature, I bought one of those at-home pregnancy tests and it showed positive. I was shocked. But I felt confident that since God seemed to go out of His way to create this baby, it had to be a normal pregnancy.

I was scheduled for an ultrasound a short while later. Before the ultrasound, I prayed and said, "Lord, you know I want this baby to be in the right spot. But whatever you decide, I'll joyfully accept." The ultrasound showed no pregnancy sack within the uterus and it turned out to be another ectopic pregnancy in the right tube, the same tube from which one of the babies of our first pregnancy was lost.

Several days later, while in the operating room being prepared for surgery, one of the nurses came over to me and asked, "Is there anything I can do for you?" I replied, "Yes, there is something you can do for me. I was wondering if you would baptise my baby when the doctor removes it from the tube." She looked surprised and then smiled and said, "I would love to do that for you." After the surgery, she said that she had never been asked to do something like that and she was really happy to do it for me. (This particular hospital performs abortions on a regular basis.)

I spent four days in the hospital. James brought Josh, Ben and Timmy to see me every day. It was quite apparent that it was Timmy who missed Mommy the most. Up until that time, I had never left him for more than an hour or two. Also, he was still nursing, especially at night, and he cried a lot of the time because I could not be there for him. This was one of the most difficult aspects of the whole experience.

While I was in the hospital, the doctor recommended that I have the right tube removed since we had two confirmed ectopic pregnancies in that tube. He explained that he had originally left the tube in place because of our desire to have more children. However, he said that it would probably be in our best interests to have that tube removed since it was obviously not working (though he admitted the tube had no scarring and appeared normal).

We didn't know what to think. On the one hand, the doctor made sense. We had already had two confirmed ectopic pregnancies in the right tube and having that tube removed might increase our chances of conceiving a normal pregnancy. On the other hand, perhaps we weren't trusting God enough. We were confused. We prayed and asked God to help guide us to make the right decision. As it turned out, He decided to take the decision out of our hands.

Two weeks after having surgery for the ectopic pregnancy, I started experiencing severe pain in the area where the right tubal pregnancy had been. I had experienced the physical pain of childbirth, abdominal surgery, miscarriage and ectopic pregnancy, but I had never felt anything like this before.

The pain was so intense I vomited and felt faint.

Back in the emergency room, I remember lying on the stretcher shivering. The nurse gently laid a warm blanket on me. "Thanks, but I'm not cold," I said. "I guess I'm scared." Then I started to cry, and more importantly, to pray. "God, I don't want to die and leave my little boys without a mother. Please give me the courage to get through this. If it's your will that I die, please give my family the courage to get through it as well." I stopped shaking and physically felt God's presence around my body, as if He was protecting me.

Just then a kind-looking surgeon asked me, "So what's the problem?" I briefly told him what was wrong. He asked, "How many pregnancies have you had?" My answer

was almost comical: "Seven pregnancies and eight babies: three ectopic pregnancies, two miscarriages and three live births."

After being examined by the doctor, I was diagnosed as having trophoblastic, or fetal tissue still growing in the tube, even though the baby had been removed. I was scheduled for emergency surgery.

During surgery, it was found that the right tube was the size of a large dill pickle. In a normal pregnancy the trophoblastic tissue is the outer portion of the embryo which is as invasive as cancer and helps the embryo implant in the uterine wall. When it exists without a pregnancy, it is still like cancer. In less than two weeks, it grew from microscopic tissue to the size of several large tumours inside the tube, all over the ovary and all over the bowel.

After the surgery, the surgeon said, "You were right to come in when you did. You would have had literally seconds to live if it had exploded."

When I think of the babies that we have lost, there is a sadness that I never got to hold or cuddle or nurse them. But as a well-known Catholic speaker has said, "It is our job as parents to help our children to heaven. When we lose a baby through miscarriage, we have done our job and our child is in heaven." I believe James and I have five little souls in heaven.

I remember questioning God after my first pregnancy: "Why did you allow this to happen when you knew these babies wouldn't be born?" I now realize that God created all those little souls for a reason: they have eternal life. I consider it a privilege and honour to have helped to create life and to have carried those babies even for a short time.

I now know a tiny portion of what Mary must have felt to carry Jesus for nine months, nurture and love him for 33 years, only to have him suffer and die in front of her. She accepted all this without question and without doubt. Any suffering I experience or have experienced has caused me to feel closer to Christ. I no longer ask God to take away my pain but to help me to accept it with joy. I no longer worry that perhaps we will not be able to have more children or that perhaps I'll have another ectopic pregnancy. I am learning to trust God completely.

Ellie and James Hrkach live in Arnprior, Ontario. Since this story was written in 1994, Ellie and James have had 3 more pregnancies. Adam was born in January of 1996, a pregnancy ended in miscarriage in 1998, and they are expecting the birth of a child (their eleventh child, fifth living) in May of 1999.