

My story began several months ago, after my husband and I had moved to Boystown to become Family Teachers. For years we felt led to adopt from Ethiopia, so we began the long process of adoption, starting with the necessary requirement of permission from our Boystown clinical specialist to grow our family. We were excited to begin the adoption since our hearts were both on fire for our adopted child.

Literally that night, when I wasn't feeling well, I took a pregnancy test and surprisingly it was positive. You see, we only had one son thus far and it had taken years to conceive him. The road of infertility had been long and this pregnancy was unexpected. In fact, I actually became angry with God, asking why He had awakened my heart to adoption if we couldn't even work on it during the pregnancy.

I battled my emotions of wondering about God's supreme plan but in my final moment of surrender of "my plan" to His, I told God I knew His plan was perfect and that this precious baby I was carrying was His. I laid it all before my God, I surrendered and I "gave" the child to Him.

A month or so passed and at 17 weeks of pregnancy I went in for my first check up. My husband, Amos, and our son Malachi, decided to go with me. The visit with the doctor went well. We then went next door for the ultrasound and the technician was able to quickly bring our child's heartbeat and shadows of his body on the screen. We learned we were having another boy!

The ultrasound technician then began the measurements and that's when she grew quiet. It wasn't hard to detect the urgency in her and how upset she was becoming. The fear in me grew quickly and after what seemed like forever she informed us we would need to meet with our doctor again. We went back to our doctor's office and waited. Thankfully a nurse came and coerced Malachi, our one year old, with a piece of candy out of the room.

Our doctor came in and informed us that our unborn son had a rare neural tube defect called anencephaly. She told us of how our son's skull wasn't forming and thus, his condition was fatal. She said he would most likely continue to develop normally inside me but could not survive once he was born.

I watched as my husband immediately began to weep. I felt the shock too but I turned my attention to my broken husband. Our doctor left and my usually composed, joyful husband continued to weep and I just held him. I was almost as shocked at his transparent response as I was of our son's diagnosis. We slowly gathered ourselves and drove home.

The next day I began a poem. I had never before written poetry but the words just seemed to pour out of the deepest parts of me. At times I felt like the Holy Spirit was typing the words, not me. We had to go in for another appointment

with a perinatal specialist, who confirmed the diagnosis of anencephaly and told us we could abort the fetus if we so choose. I remember hearing the doctor's suggestion and an instant surge of anger rushed through me. I told him that I would carry my son for as long as he stayed alive within me.

My determination deterred the doctor from pressuring us any further. Amos and I asked about pregnancy complications and thankfully, there were few. We had another ultrasound and this ultrasound technician gave us some photos of our son, his little toes and feet. Amos and I decided that day to name our son AJ, short for Amos Junior, since I wanted to confirm he was a baby boy, my son, and not just a "fetus."

We knew we would need to share the news with our girls. Boystown, for those unfamiliar with it, is a small town within the big city of Omaha, with its mission statement of "saving children, healing families." We served at-risk youth, children that had been abused or neglected, most of which were wards of the state. As Family Teachers, we lived in a Boystown home with 4 to 6 of these "at-risk" girls. We were their parent "models" to teach them appropriate behaviors, ensure they succeeded at school, attend church each Sunday and just be a family. We literally did everything together, cleaning the house together, watching movies together on Friday nights, cooking meals together, etc.

I love those girls, each of them so dearly. My husband and I have since moved from Boystown to Lincoln, but my heart still aches for them. We didn't let them call us "mom" and "dad" very often but that was who we were to them.

That evening, we sat our four Boystown girls down, handed them each a copy of the poem I had began and a sonogram picture of AJ's feet. We told them our story and we all cried together. It is funny how God orchestrates things. At that time there were debates between the presidential candidates and one of the topics was abortion. We told the girls that AJ wouldn't live once he was born but that abortion was not an option for us because we believed that God had a plan for our son on this earth, however short his life might be.

We contacted our Boystown pastor to come and speak with us about AJ. Once again, our God is so intimate, He loves me so deeply and He knew what story from the Bible would speak directly to my soul. I have always been fascinated with the stories of David. A man that had lots of ups and downs, committed adultery, murdered, seemingly calls God out in different Psalms and God still said that David was a "man after My own heart."

Pastor Fluellen told us the story of David's infant son with Bathsheba that fell ill and later died. The truths presented in this story became pivotal in continuing to point me toward the Lord. After visiting with our Pastor I had renewed hope and I continued writing the poem. Day in and day out I lived knowing that there would be no baby shower or nursery for our son.

I instead began gathering songs that brought comfort to me, printed the lyrics out and hung them on the bathroom mirror. That proved to help put words to my husband's pain. Lyrics like: "You heard my cry to You...my strength is almost gone how can I carry on if I can't find You?...as the thunder rolls I barely hear You whisper through the rain "I'm with you" and as Your mercy falls I raise my hands and praise the God who gives and takes away" or "Bring me joy, bring me peace...bring me anything that brings You glory, and I know there'll be days when this life brings me pain but if that's what it takes to praise You, Jesus bring the rain...You are much greater than my pain."

Some of the most difficult moments were when strangers would ask about my pregnancy. Many people would say, "You must be so excited." I struggled with this statement, asking God to please answer through me. A few of our loved ones and well meaning friends would say if we just believed enough, or had faith that God would heal AJ, or pray more, that God would heal him.

I didn't know how to tell them that I knew with every fiber of my being that God could heal AJ, but that I didn't believe that was His will for me or my son. So I would continue to lean on the words of David, "How do I know God will be gracious and let my son live?" It was also hard watching people avoid me because they didn't know what to say, not knowing that silence and a gentle touch would have been enough.

Every day was a day closer to my son's death and yet it was another day, another gift of time from a wonderful Creator, for me to spend with AJ. I am not sure where the strength came from, other than God lifting me from brokenness daily. I made the choice with AJ not to become bitter and not to ask "Why?" I had already been down that road.

As a child, my father was rarely around and my mother worked long hours as a surgical nurse. Their relationship was either hot or cold so they couldn't come together long enough to marry or have much of a relationship. So when my father died suddenly of a heart attack during my senior year of high school, I asked God "why?" Why not give me the chance to get to know my father, God? My mother shut down and I literally planned an entire funeral for my father, the casket, flowers, eulogy, music, food, every detail.

I know what bitterness tastes like. I have had it in my system for years. Looking back I could have let God speak to me then but I chose to turn away from Him and into my anger and sadness. I knew that I didn't want to return to that place again and I didn't want to waste the little time I had with my son. Choosing to feel the sadness, to call out to God in desperation, to cry, to let a dear friend hold me and tell me it *was okay to want my son*, even though I knew God would take him home right away - those were some of the best choices I have made thus far in my life.

Some might read Job's story and wonder how a loving God can give Job a second family expecting it to just be okay. I know that the next child God gives us will never replace my son AJ, but that is not what God is asking of me. He wants me to share the pain with Him, to let him hold me night after night when there is no one else who understands. I knew that as soon as I went into labor I risked losing my son, but I had to trust God to take care of him for me in Heaven. I have learned to take the verse from Matthew 6:20 very literally, "but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven..."

Towards the end of my pregnancy I became quite big, too big. When I went in for a check up I measured 38 weeks along and I was only 32 weeks along. So a "therapeutic amniocentesis" was scheduled to drain amniotic fluid out. Since anencephaly causes improper skull development, part of the brain is impaired and my dear son could not swallow as much amniotic fluid as he normally should have, thus I grew bigger and bigger. For over thirty minutes the doctor held a needle several inches long in my belly, slowly drawing fluid out.

It was painful but I wanted more time with my son. Pregnancy is often an uncomfortable state for many but within weeks I was in a lot of pain so I went in for another measurement. I measured like I was 46 weeks along (thankfully most of us don't go that long carrying a baby!) at only 36 weeks. I was growing almost a centimeter around each day. I was carrying so much extra amniotic fluid that my joints were swelling and my hips hurt considerably when I walked, so the birth was scheduled later that week.

The day had arrived and no words could describe the fear and dread I felt. I had another therapeutic amniocentesis and then pitocin to begin contractions. I heard his heartbeat on the monitor and it brought me joy. Only a few hours passed before I pushed and AJ was born *but somewhere between me and the outside AJ went to live with Jesus in Heaven.*

It was all worth it, every excruciating moment before AJ's birth to holding his lifeless body in my arms. All was worth knowing a God that loves, that deeply loves me. He loves me. He chose to send His Son to die so that I could be one with Him. For years I struggled with the thought that a loving, good God would send His only Son to die a gruesome death, but now I understand. I get that it was the only way and perhaps losing AJ was the only way I could understand the height, depth and width of His unending love for me.

I will never be the same but not because my life is marked by pain but because the wounds of deep loss have been healed by the great Lover of this world and through my wounds, others may catch a glimpse of His love, His grace and His perfect plan.

Amos and I shared the hospital bed that night while holding our son. It was difficult feeling the heat leave his small body. The following morning the mortuary

came to the hospital to take his body to be cremated and it took all that was in me to let him go. I had lovingly nourished him within me for months, careful to do what moms do to protect their growing baby. I so dearly love him and look forward to meeting him in Heaven, where there is no pain, no sorrow, no brokenness. Someday I will see life in my son's eyes, I will hold him again and his body will have life in it!

A few days later we had a funeral for AJ. We had photos from the day of his birth and the blanket and hat my grandmother had crocheted for him. The songs were played that had carried us through the difficult times and I read the poem. I had finished writing the poem earlier that day. AJ's brother, grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, our Boystown girls and other friends and family were in attendance. God brought finality to a deep sadness that needed an ending only He could provide.

This past month, on March 13th, AJ would have turned one. I planned an intimate gathering of close family on that day and we let 30 colorful balloons rise heavenward on his birthday. We sang happy birthday to AJ, and Malachi, who is now three, prayed before the balloons were released.

As you say, Jennifer, God is *good!*