When the people of Judah had returned from Babylon to live in their own land, eventually Romans came and took over their country. The people lived in their own towns and villages, but they had to pay taxes to the Romans and live under Roman law. In the north of the country, there was a small town called Nazareth. A man called Joseph lived there. He was a carpenter. Joseph made things like tables and chairs, and he helped to build houses. Sometimes he did small jobs like making wooden boxes or repairing things which had broken. Joseph got on well with his neighbours, and they would all come to him for help if they needed something mended. Joseph was kind and he would help people even if they did not really have enough money to pay him.

One day, Joseph did some work for a family in Nazareth who needed a new wooden frame made for their well, to help them draw up the water. While Joseph was working at the house he met the daughter of the family; she was called Mary. When all the work was done, Joseph and Mary’s family all shared a meal. Joseph liked Mary very much, and so, when he got home, he asked his family if they would be happy for him to marry Mary. Soon Joseph’s family and Mary’s family had a meeting; it was all agreed! Joseph and Mary could get married the next summer. Mary’s parents liked Joseph very much and they were pleased that Mary was going to marry a carpenter. ‘Carpenters always have work,’ they said, ‘because people always need things mending.’ Joseph and Mary had a big engagement party with music and singing, and everyone in Nazareth was happy for them.

All this happened before the day that Mary was alone in her parents’ house and was visited by a heavenly messenger. The messenger told her that she would have a baby and that this baby would be the Messiah, the Son of God. Mary had been frightened by what the visitor said to her, but she was sure that it was a message from God. God wanted her to be the mother of the Messiah, even though she was only a young girl and not yet married to Joseph. Mary had told the messenger, ‘I am the Lord’s servant. May everything happen just as you have said.’ The visitor had explained to Mary that her cousin Elizabeth was going to have a baby too; so Mary hurried off to visit her cousin. Mary wanted someone to talk to who would understand how she was feeling. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months.

It was only when she came back that Mary felt brave enough to tell the whole story to Joseph. He found it all very hard to believe. There were no prophets in the land in those days. Why would God suddenly send a messenger to Mary? Why would the messenger say something so strange—that Mary was going to have a baby? Joseph wanted to believe Mary
because he was sure that she would not lie to him, but perhaps it had all been a dream of hers. Anyway, Joseph felt hurt that Mary had begun a new adventure without him. If she was going to have a special baby who would grow up to be the Messiah, then Mary was going to be very busy. Perhaps she would not have time to be married to an ordinary carpenter. Joseph sat up late at night, thinking and worrying about everything that Mary had told him. Finally, he made a decision. He would tell Mary that the engagement was off and that he would not marry her. Joseph went to sleep.

While he was sleeping, he had a dream. An angel, a messenger from heaven, came and spoke to him. 'Don’t be afraid, Joseph,' the angel said. The angel explained to him that God had a job for him to do, helping Mary. 'You are good at mending things, Joseph – mend your friendship with Mary, marry her and help her to look after her baby. You must name him Jesus, because he will save his people.' When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel had told him to do. Mary and Joseph were married and they waited for the birth of their baby. They knew that he would be a son, sent by God, and they were ready to name him Jesus.

[We hang the symbol of a saw on the Jesse tree to remember Joseph, who worked as a carpenter, listened to God, and was always mending things.]

A moment to wonder

I wonder how it felt to be Mary’s helper with this special baby?

A prayer

As green as a healthy tree, the story of God’s love keeps growing.
We remember Joseph, who listened to the angel and married Mary
and helped to bring up Jesus.
We pray for all fathers, especially those with new babies.
Amen.