



Tell me the Story

The Carpenter

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I was very young then – still in my teens. And now I'm old, and so much has happened. People often ask me about those days. But not so much now – not since Dr Lucas wrote down my story – you can read it all there, if you want.

But I don't mind telling you my story – in fact it's good to remember.

As I said, I was just a young girl when it all started to happen. They were dark times then. The King was a cruel tyrant. 'The Great,' they called him. Great in pride and in cruelty, if you asked me. O yes, he was famous for all the fine buildings he put up ... in Greek and Roman style. He even completely rebuilt our Temple, turning it into a great big one. Perhaps he thought people would think he was as great as Solomon! But it takes more than putting up fine buildings to make a man great. In any case, he thought nothing of building pagan temples as well. And do you know, before he died he had his wife and her sons put to





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death! At least she died before her sons ... poor woman.

It had been dark for a long time. There had been a ray of hope for a time when Judas Maccabaeus won our independence again. But it was only for a time, before the Romans came – and then they appointed Herod as King. He was a friend of the first Emperor – Augustus they called him. It's funny how they gave themselves such high sounding names – 'the Great' and 'Augustus' (His Reverence). Not like the name my son gave himself – the Son of Man – that was all.

Anyway, as I was saying, it was a dark time. There had been no word from the Lord for a long time – many lifetimes of men. Of course we had the Law, and the Prophets and the Writings, but they were all pointing forward to something – something much greater. There were great promises, you know – promises to Abraham – to make one of his descendants a great blessing to all the nations of the world – promises about the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, about a great Son of David who would set us free, rescue the poor and needy and put down the rich and proud.

There were some of us longing for that time. Many thought it was freedom from the Romans and from Herod. I thought that too then. But now ... a lot has changed since then. It's a different world.

You know, I'm descended from King David. So was my husband Joseph – descended directly from the line of the true kings of Israel. A people long forgotten,





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living in the shadows – while upstart high priests and kings lorded it over God's people. But it was not to them that Gabriel came – not to a daughter of Herod in his fine Palace nor to a daughter of the High Priest in Herod's Temple in Jerusalem, but to me! Yes, to me, a poor Nazareth girl engaged to be married to Joseph the carpenter!

A lot of people have asked me about Gabriel. 'What was it like to meet an angel?' they say. Well, it wasn't like what people imagine. It wasn't even like the experience the Bethlehem shepherds told me about later: bright, shining light – awesome, terrifying. He was quiet-like; spoke gently.

It wasn't what he looked like, but what he said that bothered me. He said I was highly favoured and the Lord was with me. You wouldn't even say that to some fine lady, and I was a nobody. He could see I was troubled and he said, 'Mary, don't be afraid.' He said I had found what I had been looking for all my life – the favour and the grace of God.

That's when he told me. He said I was going to have a baby. And not just any baby! He said I would have a son, and he told me what to name him – Joshua, or Jesus in the language of the West. He said God would give him the throne of his ancestor David and his kingdom would last forever.

But that's not all. He said he would be called the Son of God. I didn't know what he meant – then. I was struggling to take it all in. The return of the King! The birth of the Promised One. God was starting to move.





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The waiting was over. The darkness was ending. And I was going to be his mother!

How did I feel?! I was shocked, astonished, dazed, delighted, scared. What did I say? Remember, I was only a teenager. And I've always been a very practical person. I said, 'How's this going to happen? I'm still a virgin!' You might think that's no way to talk to an angel, but I wanted to know! You see he never said a word about Joseph.

He said, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God.'

Then he told me about my old relative Elizabeth. She'd never been able to have children. And now, he said, she was six months pregnant. 'Nothing is impossible with God.' That's what he said.

That's when it finally dawned on me. I was going to have a baby. And no man was going to be involved. Not Joseph, not anyone. And my baby was going to be the One – the long promised Son of David!

I was scared, but I managed to say, 'I'm the Lord's servant. Let it happen just as you've said.' He seemed happy with that and he left.

Well, my mind was in turmoil. What was I going to do? I didn't know. I needed to talk to someone, but I couldn't talk to Joseph or my parents – I was scared of what they would think. It was just after that that the news came through from the hill country of Judea – about Elizabeth expecting! I realised this was





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the perfect opportunity. I said I wanted to go to help Elizabeth. Well, to cut a long story short, my parents and Joseph eventually all agreed it was a good idea. God was so good to me. He allowed me to go to see the one person in the world who would understand.

It was a long journey over the hills to her town near Jerusalem. I had a lot of time to think over what was happening. Words kept on coming into my mind. Then, when I arrived at Elizabeth's place, something strange happened. As soon as I shouted 'Hello,' she came out and said I was blessed among women. She called me the mother of her Lord and said her baby had jumped for joy inside her when he heard my voice! She knew. Don't ask me how, but she knew.

That's when it all burst out of me – all I'd been thinking over on the way there. I could hardly believe it was me talking. I'd never made a speech before. But all I kept thinking about was how God had blessed me – a nobody. God was turning the world upside down. The high and mighty were going to be brought down and the poor and the humble were going to be lifted up. It just all poured out of me. Elizabeth made me memorise it and she memorised it. She even got her husband to write it all down. He had been struck dumb, ever since Gabriel had announced his son's birth, but anyway he could hear and he could write. He had written down all that the angel had said to him and that their son was to be called John. You can read all about it in Dr Lucas' history – he copied it all down. A very clever man, Dr Lucas. A very nice man too... for a Greek!





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But those three months with Elizabeth were great times – I stayed with her until her baby was born. And that was funny! Because his father couldn't speak, all the greybeards were going to name the baby Zechariah, after his father. Elizabeth said 'No! He's to be called John!' There was much shaking of heads at this, because that wasn't a family name. They asked Zechariah and to everyone's astonishment he wrote 'His name is John!' That's when he started to speak again, and it all burst out of him – just like it had with me. He said John would be a prophet and he would prepare the way of the Lord. He said the rising sun was coming from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death.

When I went back to Nazareth, I knew what I had to do. I'd talked it over with Elizabeth. I had to tell Joseph. She said he would understand... eventually.

That was the worst time. He didn't understand at all. He was talking about breaking off the engagement. He said he would do it quietly. He didn't want me to be disgraced. (That was so like Joseph – always wanted to do the right thing, but didn't want to hurt anyone.) He just wouldn't listen. I suppose it was understandable. His girl was pregnant and he knew he wasn't the father. He couldn't seem to see past that. I cried myself to sleep that night. Everything seemed black again. Why was God allowing this to happen?

I don't know what would have happened, but that night God gave Joseph a dream. An angel told him





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there was nothing to be afraid of. He was to marry me. And he said exactly what Gabriel had said to me – my son was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and he was to be called Jesus (which means 'Saviour'), because he will save his people from their sins.

I don't mind saying there was a lot of crying and making up after that! And we did get married. And after Jesus was born we did have other children – James, Joseph, Judas and Simon, and the girls. But none of them were like him. How could they be?

But you wanted to know about his birth. He wasn't born in Nazareth where we lived. No, it was strange how it all come about in God's plan. This is where the Emperor comes in – Caesar Augustus sitting in Rome decides that there should be a census of the whole empire. And everyone had to go to his home town to register. Well, Joseph didn't come from Nazareth in Galilee. No, he came from Bethlehem in Judea, King David's town. So that's where we had to go. It was a long and difficult journey, with me nearly nine months pregnant. We had to be there before a certain date, and we just got there in time. In fact we couldn't find anywhere to stay, the place was so crowded. And nobody gave up their room for us. I thought that strange at the time – I looked very pregnant by then. But then, it's not just the high and mighty that stand on their rights, is it? A lot of people didn't have room for him then – and they still don't.

And that's why he was born in the stable and





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his first bed was the animals' feeding trough. The innkeeper was a kindly man and he wouldn't turn us away completely. It wasn't the cleanest place to give birth, I suppose, but it was snug enough.

There was nothing special about the birth itself. I've given birth several times since then, and it was the same agony and the same elation on the birth of a healthy child. But it was special because he was special. I don't mean he didn't cry or need to be fed or changed like any other baby. He was just the same as far as all that goes. But he was the Firstborn. And not just *my* firstborn, if you understand. We knew who he was, only we didn't fully understand then.

We felt this awesome sense of responsibility as we wrapped him up and laid him in the manger. I know all parents do, but this was different. We were responsible for bringing up the one who would be known as the Son of David, the Son of the Most High. And here he was starting off in life in a stable!

But I suppose it was appropriate too. When he grew up he said he had come to preach good news to the poor. And God had already shown me that he was bringing down the proud and lifting up the humble. And you can't have more humble beginnings than he had.

And as if to emphasise that, that's when the shepherds came tumbling in. Now, I don't know about where you come from, but in our area shepherds were considered the lowest of the low. They had to be out in the hills in all weathers. They couldn't get to





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all the religious festivals. They were really considered outcasts. I always wondered about that, because our great ancestor Jacob was a shepherd, the prophet Moses was a shepherd and even King David was a shepherd. I was glad and proud later, when my Son said he was the good shepherd. It was as if he was restoring a lost dignity.

But there was nothing dignified about these shepherds. They were straight off the hills. And they were excited. They looked a cross between people who had seen a ghost and people who had seen the light!

They said, 'There he is. Just as the angel said. Wrapped up warmly, but lying in a manger. It's just like he said!' And they stood around looking sheepish (I don't know if shepherds can look sheepish, but these did!) We asked them what they meant. They needed some prompting, but eventually we got the whole story.

They had been guarding their sheep in the hills nearby, when all of a sudden the whole place was lit up, like lightning that just stayed there! And there was this angel. They were scared out of their wits, but he told them not to be afraid. He had been sent with good news of great joy for everyone. 'Today in the town of David,' he said, 'a Saviour has been born to you. He is the Messiah. He is the Lord. And you'll know it's true when you find him wrapped up, but lying in a manger!'

There was one word in all that that really stuck





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in my mind. It was the word 'Saviour'. You see that's what I'd said that day at Elizabeth's house – 'God my Saviour.' And then that's what the angel had said to Joseph – he was to be called Jesus because he would save his people from their sins.

There was one last thing I should tell you. It happened six weeks later, the day we went up to the Temple in Jerusalem for my ceremony of purification after giving birth. There was an old man there called Simeon. He took my baby in his arms, and he prayed and told God he could let him die peacefully now, because he had seen his salvation! Then he turned to me – I'll never forget his words – he said, 'This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

Those were about the last words that old Simeon spoke to anyone, and they came true – every word! They came back to me that day – the day he was pierced. No mother should have to see that. And yet I wanted to be there. And I'm glad I was there. Even then he was concerned for me – got his friend John to look after me.

It was a crown of thorns he was wearing that day, but I thought he was more kingly than all the Herods and Caesars of this world. He has brought them down, but he has risen up and he has lifted up the poor and the humble with him.

Yes, I believe in him. I believe he is my Saviour. And





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if I, his mother, who nursed him and cleaned him, believe that he is the Saviour of the world, the Son of God ... if his brothers and sisters, who fought and argued with him as he was growing up, can believe in him, I know you can too. All you have to do is accept you are poor and needy and guilty, and accept that he is the Saviour of sinners and ask him to forgive you.

