

Reflecting on 2020 through the Christmas story

Written by Emily Hoe-Crook

Photographs by Samantha Burgoyne



Introduction

These resources are an opportunity for adults and young people to explore the challenges and changes to everyday life we have experienced this year, and look towards the new year with hope in Jesus. The five 'scenes' take the context and characters from the Christmas story and invite us to make connections with life during the pandemic. We can reflect on our feelings and response to what's happened, and come alongside the people in the Christmas story with fresh insight and understanding.

'Now' and 'then'

Each scene contains a passage from Luke's or Matthew's account of the Christmas story. The connection between 'now' and 'then' is brought to life through a monologue where a voice talks about an aspect of life in the pandemic, and then switches to a voice from a character in the Christmas story. Questions, prayer, and a song to listen to offer different ways into conversation and reflection. A nativity scene is built up over the scenes with traditional nativity set figures and symbols representing aspects of life today.

The five scenes are: **1 Rules and regulations** Our response to directives from central authorities alongside life under Roman rule; **2 Unsung heroes** The contribution of key workers and the shepherds' key role in telling the Good News; **3 Travelling light** Migrants' search for a safe home and the magi's journey to an unknown destination; **4 At a distance** Family life in lockdown and the Holy Family's isolation at the time of their son's birth; **5 Ways and means** Churches' response to the pandemic and the innkeeper's solution.

How can the resources be used?

The material can be used in groups meeting online, as a gathered group with social-distancing and appropriate preparation of any handouts and equipment, or by individuals/households on their own. If you normally hold a series of four Advent sessions, you could extend the time period and start in November, or select from the five scenes.

Encourage people to build up their nativity scene at home as each character is engaged, ideally leaving it displayed, so that by the final week the scene is set, and all symbols and characters are present. You could ask people to take photos along the way or at the conclusion, to share on social media/ your website. If people don't have a nativity set, there are many templates on the internet with figures to cut out. Do a search on 'nativity set templates' and view it through the Images option.

Music suggestions: Links to the songs are embedded in this pdf. If you receive a paper copy, you can find them all on YouTube. Good background music for meditative moments is Alexander Sundstrom's 2019 instrumental album, *Hope*.

There is a follow-up activity for each scene. If you use the materials with a group, suggest that participants do it between sessions. You could open each session by talking about it.

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About the writer

Emily Hoe-Crook is a Student Deacon at Queens Foundation in Birmingham, and was formerly employed as a church-based families and children's worker. She contributes regularly to the ROOTS resources.

Emily wrote this resource on her own initiative, but offered ROOTS the chance to present and share it. We really liked her original and inspired way of combining reflection on life during 2020 with the experiences of the characters in the Christmas story, and feel that many people would find this process helpful right now. So we are offering the materials to ROOTS subscribers and to other people who sign up to receive them through church networks.

There is an opportunity to recognise the insight and imagination that went into creating the materials. Emily says, 'Micah68 is an initiative close to my heart <http://www.micah6-8.org.uk/>. It is a Christian expression of advocacy, friendship and practical support for the peoples of the Middle East. If you wish to consider making a donation, it would be gratefully received.'

Scene 1 Rules and regulations

Our response to directives from central authorities alongside life under Roman rule

Nativity set: the stable, or empty crib.

Symbols: a face mask to represent the pandemic, and a pen and paper to represent the census.



Luke 2.1-5

In those days, a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

Now – and then

How might our response to living with frequent directives and legislation from central authorities through a pandemic reflect the reaction of those living in the Middle East at the time of the nativity? How much grumbling really was there, or were people happy to acquiesce to Roman rule? There may be more resonance between ourselves and the Holy Family at this time than we imagine. Can we draw closer to Mary and Joseph's experience because of our current circumstances?

Monologue: voices of authority

NOW... It's not easy facilitating a situation like this, you know. It's unprecedented, a pandemic with global travel, people going wherever they want, mixing with anyone they feel like. It's hard to keep a handle on this. And movement equals more cases. It might seem like we don't know what we're doing, and perhaps acting too late, but honestly, it's like herding cats! You try telling students in freshers' week they can't party!?

We're trying to keep public freedom and the economy going – we're between a rock and a hard place here. Yes, public opinion is important, and no, we don't want unnecessary deaths or suffering, so please, just do as we ask. We do have your best interests at heart, you know, and this is all for the greater good.

THEN... This is for your own good, you know. By taking a country-wide census we can get a better handle on where things are up to – who lives where, which tradesmen have moved, how families are growing. There's more movement than ever now – people moving about all over the country whereas before, you stayed where you were born. It's like herding goats! We need to make sure it doesn't get out of hand.

You might well ask why people can't just register where they live and collate the answers. Hmm. Perhaps that would make more sense, make things more straightforward, but in all honesty, it makes things harder for us. We've got the economy to think of. Just do as we ask, or there will be consequences. We have your best interests at heart, and this is all for the greater good.

Conversation and reflection

- How might you relate to Joseph or Mary's position on hearing about the requirements of the census?
- How have your response and feelings to the guidelines and restrictions evolved over the course of the pandemic?
- What might a Christian response to the current restrictions look like?



A song to listen to

[Blessings – We Pray for Peace](#), Shemaroo External Grace

Prayer

Start your nativity scene with the stable or empty crib and beside it put a face mask to represent the pandemic, and a pen and paper to represent the census.

Loving God, it's not easy facing this pandemic and all of its wide-reaching consequences. Nor is it easy being the ones making decisions which affect so many in vital ways. We pray for those in power, for your wisdom and discernment to guide the conversations and choices ahead. Grant us peace and grace in trying times, and draw us closer to you. Amen.

Follow-up activity

Write the names of our Prime Minister and leading politicians on a sticky note, and place it symbolically in your nativity set area. Say a prayer asking for God's grace on them. You could repeat the prayer above.

Scene 2 **Unsung heroes**

The contribution of key workers and the shepherds' key role in telling the Good News

Nativity set: the shepherds and angels.

Symbols: make or draw a rainbow representing key workers.



Luke 2.8-20

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Now – and then

The shepherds could be seen as the lowliest grouping of people at the time of Jesus' birth – the humble key workers who had to work in all weathers, all circumstances, with little time off and next to no recognition. But in this passage, we see them raised up – there is a distinct adjustment in their apparent value to others.

There is a curious resonance here with our attitudes towards the NHS and other key workers in this time of pandemic, allowing much food for thought and discussion. Also, the high proportion of BAME key workers and how they continue to be adversely affected by Covid-19.

Monologue: key workers, now – and then

NOW... I can't believe it! For the first time, people show gratefulness for the work I'm doing. Passers-by have started to give me eye contact. Give a pat on the back (metaphorically, that is, we have to observe distancing like everyone else these days). Suddenly, everything's changed. I'm no longer someone to get frustrated with all the time – yes, there's a long wait, you feel like you're wasting your time – my delivery might take longer than usual with the extra checks we have to do – but we'll get to you as soon as we can. Others have found this too – teachers, paramedics, A&E nurses and doctors. Eye contact, smiles for the first time, unsought. A recognition that we're working hard for you, putting our lives on the line for you. Humble key workers, suddenly seen differently – clapped for once a week – sandwiches and cold drinks placed into our hands in appreciation. Everything's changed. I hope they don't forget.

THEN... They'd never noticed me before, those people rushing about their everyday business – collecting wool for weaving, selling produce, raising families. We were passed by whenever we actually ventured down into Bethlehem – too smelly from living with the sheep, I suppose. No one would give us more than a fleeting glance, perhaps inwardly thanking God they didn't have to do our jobs or look the way we do. I was an inconvenience mostly, someone to give a wide berth to. Humble key workers.

But everything changed that night. The angel's visit – well, don't get me started, I'd swear I was dreaming at first – but I know full well I couldn't dream up a sound that pure or a sight that beautiful. That's another story, but the way people looked at us once our story was confirmed – suspicion to begin with, naturally – after all, why would the newborn king want lowly visitors like us to be the first to see him? But once others had seen him, found out for themselves how special the baby was, they looked at me in a way I'd never known before: respect; reverence. That tiny baby boy in the filthy stable made all the difference. I hope they don't forget.

Scene 2 **Unsung heroes**

Conversation and reflection

- What do you think the everyday encounters between key workers and other people were like before coronavirus, and before the angels' visit?
- Is it possible to foster a culture in which there is more respect for people in different jobs and occupations? How?
- How can we continue to recognise key workers during the pandemic?

A song to listen to

[The Lord bless you and keep you](#), John Rutter. Use it as a prayer for key workers.

Prayer

Place the shepherds and angels in your nativity scene, together with a rainbow to represent key workers.

Pray for key workers, naming those known personally, then conclude with the grace.

Follow-up activity

Make a list of all the key workers you can think of in your area – this might include NHS workers, delivery drivers, teachers, care workers, food suppliers, and many more. Pray over your list, and consider writing a card of thanks and support, or another way of showing your appreciation.



Scene 3 Travelling light

Migrants' search for a safe home and the wise men's journey to an unknown destination

Nativity set: the wise men.

Symbols: a glass of water to represent a basic human need.



Matthew 2.1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.



Now – and then

The wise men travelled a great distance in order to worship the newborn king. Travel has been a significant issue for each of us in this pandemic. Migrants' struggles to find sanctuary and escape conflict are perhaps forgotten in the light of pandemic news. We long to visit our loved ones and have freedom of movement – we have all experienced to some extent the emotions and upheavals of being far from loved ones and having travel restricted. We reflect on journeying with the wise men, and our own experiences of this Covid-19 journey.

Monologue: migrants and magi

NOW... Part of me wonders if I'll ever see my home again – it feels very far on this dark night. My companions are exhausted, hungry and impatient, but those thoughts are not mine. The child – the small boy – his face is imprinted into my mind. He looks so small, so fragile, so frightened.

We have come so far, clinging to whatever we can – the side of the dinghy, the destination, safety, each other. Our possessions are few, all we could carry – I am grateful now for brevity – I have walked so many miles, and the hands of my loved ones are all I care to hold in this moment. Strangers must think me mad, but they do not know my story. Houses destroyed, the hospital I served in, my children's schools, whole cities, wiped out in a night. The fear, the lack of anything we needed – food, security, purpose. There was no alternative. The child, I hope there is a future for him in this new country, for all of us. Lord, guide us there safely, I pray.

I can't help thinking about my wife back home. She's quite used to me announcing a new path, a journey, a quest. Not usually one that takes me so far away, but she's supportive and understanding. Strangers must think me mad, but they do not know my story.

THEN... The journey has been rigorous – though grateful for servants and beasts to carry my possessions, the roads are rough and unforgiving. I was relieved beyond words to reach my destination – following a star, my trade, my belief and my skill – to finally arrive and be received by the surprised family. A young boy, eyes twinkling and bright with curiosity and grace, mother tired but welcoming and kind, father strong and good-natured. The travelling with my companions had been worth every step, every callous and every night away from my wife. We now have a long journey back, but I know I will see my homeland again.

Scene 3 Travelling Light

Conversation and reflection

- Beyond finding the new king, what may the wise men have been searching for within themselves by undertaking such a long journey? Do you think they will have found it?
- Share or reflect on your own experiences of real or symbolic journeys to reach a meaningful destination, and how the ups and downs of journeying and arrival affected you.
- Explore the faithful journeying of the wise men, presumably on camels, across desert terrain, to find the new king. Remember that Jesus and his family also became refugees. How might these journeys reflect the perils of today's migrants crossing continents and seas to reach safety?

A song to listen to

[Christmas Offering](#), Casting Crowns

Prayer

Place the wise men in your nativity scene, and beside it a glass of water to represent a basic human need.

Loving God, this time is a struggle in so many ways, but help us to spare the time and energy to consider those going through more immediate peril and desperation. We pray for those who have to flee from places of insecurity and fear, and the places that receive them. Help us to be open-hearted, and proactive in our response to need on our doorsteps. Amen.

Follow-up activity

Find out which local organisations are supporting migrants and refugees in your area. Offer them support – whether financial, physical, or written support. Reflect through this week on the desperation it must take to uproot and flee your country. Pray about it.

Scene 4 At a distance

Family life in lockdown and the Holy Family's isolation at the time of their son's birth

Nativity set: Mary and Joseph (and the baby Jesus, unless your tradition is to keep him hidden until Christmas morning).

Symbols: a candle and a family photograph, to add to the nativity scene.



Luke 1.26-38

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.'

Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.



Now – and then

Mary had to give birth far from her family; there was immense pressure on Joseph to care for his new family in isolation, away from home. We explore their emotions: anger perhaps, helplessness, frustration, uncertainty. We will be thinking about families we know who have had new babies throughout lockdown and coping with family and friends not being able to get close; unemployment and financial issues many have faced, and are facing, as a result of the pandemic.

Monologue: a new mother in lockdown and Mary

NOW... I can't tell you the wrench of knowing my mother would never hold my newborn. She'd meet him, of course, but not as a newborn – we had no idea when we'd actually be able to get together as a family again. Technology helps, of course, there are so many ways to communicate – video calls are a pretty good way of keeping in touch, but nothing substitutes having your arms around someone and breathing them in.

My partner is stressed as well – once his furlough ended, his whole career went up in the air and hasn't landed still – I keep telling him not to worry too much, there's more to life than money, but the rent does need paying, and foodbanks can't provide everything. I can't wait for all of this to be over – relationship is everything – we just have to get through this, and everything will be all right, God willing.

THEN... There I was, the servant of the Lord. Stepping well and truly out of my comfort zone. I don't want you to think that it was easy, dropping everything and taking on this responsibility, but it came naturally – it felt right.

The timing of it, that was a complication, certainly. I sensed that the angel knew the gravitas of the task he informed me of. He knew it would change our lives for ever. Take Joseph, for instance, we couldn't imagine carting all of his tools on the road with us, could he really be a carpenter on the move? Besides, people trust their local tradesmen – even if he could produce his usual quality of work away from home, would anyone be inclined to buy it? It's a tricky time for us – financially, and emotionally. Any new mother would have felt the same, I'm sure. The difficulty is, new mothers almost always have their own mothers with them. It's just how we do things, one generation caring for the next. Family is integral, absolutely essential, and here we

Scene 4 **At a distance**

were, travelling to somewhere I'd never been before and where my Joseph knew no one.

We just needed to get over those initial problems, then we knew everything would be alright, God willing.

Conversation and reflection

- Explore and reflect on ways you might relate to Mary and/or Joseph in their experience of isolation and having to cope without their families at an important time in their lives.
- Describe any creative or thoughtful ways you (and others you are aware of) have found to cope with the lockdown situation.
- Who do you think the pandemic and its implications is hitting the hardest? What might we as individuals and as churches do to support them?

A song to listen to

[Mary, Did You Know?](#), Pentatonix

Prayer activity

Place Mary and Joseph (and the baby Jesus, unless your tradition is to keep him hidden until Christmas morning) in your nativity scene. Beside it, add a candle and a family photograph.

You may know of friends and/or family who have had babies during lockdown. Light a candle and name babies you're aware of, giving thanks for them. Also hold in prayer those who have experienced a significant life event during this time, e.g. becoming grandparents, getting married, bereavement, redundancy.

Loving God, we offer each of these little ones to you, and their families, aware that this is a strange time for them, not what they had planned, but they are loved and held by you.

We pray for your blessing on all those going through major life changes, whether joyful or painful. We ask for your blessing on each one of them, in your precious name. Amen.

Follow-up activity

Think of someone who has had a baby during the pandemic, or has gone through a significant life event. Send them an encouraging card or message this week. And/or, send a donation or greetings card to families or staff at your local children's hospital or women's shelter.

Scene 5 Ways and means

Churches' response to the pandemic and the innkeeper's solution

Nativity set: animals and any remaining characters.

Symbols: a biscuit or snack on a plate to represent hospitality.



Luke 2.6-7

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Now – and then

When Mary and Joseph came to a place of hospitality, the innkeeper had no room – no way of exercising his usual form of hospitality and purpose. Perhaps we have experienced this sense of frustration and purposelessness in the pandemic crisis. We consider how we might follow the innkeeper's example to search for the alternative, and offer a stable even though there's no room at our 'inns'.



Monologue: a church leader and the innkeeper's wife

NOW... It's hard to admit when you feel you can't give of your best. You feel like a bit of a failure, to be frank. You know you're capable of offering so much more – the finest welcome, the best coffee, the freshest biscuits. Then all that's taken away. You're proud, if you're honest, of the community that's built up – of all the volunteers doing their part (over and above, most of them!). You recall the laughs you've shared, the hugs, the tears, the celebration and the lament.

But everything's stripped away, nothing's the way you'd choose. Everything's got to be thought out, then rethought and thought about again. It can't be simple and straightforward and – natural. But there's something. Our church can house the foodbank. Our tots group can now meet. We've opened our doors occasionally. Our pastoral work is done over the phone, our Communion is done in gardens and on driveways, we worship over computers, our meetings are virtual but our worship is real.

The devil may say he's closed every church. But God says no, he's opened one in every home. New opportunities are out there. The housebound can access our services. Those who live far off can attend from their living rooms. People are talking about church, and what it really means.

It may not be what we want it to be, but it's something. It may not be the guest room we wish it was, but the Christ-child is here, among us, sleeping in our stable. The church is its people, and its people are together – apart or gathered. We just have to work out how to serve.

Then... You wouldn't believe it – the desperation. The anguish. The sense that his last flicker of hope was extinguished. The last inn in the town, and as packed as the rest. I'll confess, I was a little defensive when he grasped the door-post and pleaded with my husband, but give him his dues, he insisted there was nothing he could do, however desperate this man was. But when the man's wife came forward and I saw how – indisposed – she was, I crumbled. It wasn't that long since my first child came into the world, truth be told, and this lady looked far younger than me!

I felt anxious for a moment, trying to imagine my husband's reaction when I told him we had to make room for two more. But, then I remembered, the shed around the back – the one with its rear wall against the baker's. It gets toasty warm in there once the ovens get going, and there's straw covering every inch. Fetched in new clean bales only yesterday, they'd make as fine a bed as the guest rooms upstairs. I had my husband usher them round before anyone could change their minds, and I hurried for water and blankets – they both looked ready to drop, bless them.

You see, we may not have been able to offer the finest room in the place, or even a room, so to speak. But it's something. They're warm and dry, there's help on hand. We've enough bread to go around, and kindling for a fire. At least, it's something.

Scene 5 Ways and means

Conversation and reflection

- Imagine the innkeeper meeting and hearing the shepherds' story that night – how might he have felt, what might have changed for him?
- How do you relate to the idea of being the 'innkeeper' who cannot offer the hospitality in the way you wish to – as an individual and as a church community?
- What different ways have you and your church found to offer hospitality to both your church fellowship and wider community, despite (and because of) the pandemic? How could you communicate the Good News of Jesus' birth in creative ways this Christmas?

A song to listen to

[The Disciples of Tomorrow – Have You Heard God's Voice?](#),
Choir of Christ Church, Winnetka, Illinois



Prayer activity

Place the animals and any remaining characters in your nativity scene, and to complete it, add a biscuit or snack on a plate to represent hospitality.

Reflect on the different voices you've heard in the scenes. What has stayed with you particularly? Why? If you've used the materials as a group, show each other your assembled nativity sets and symbols, if possible, or have each person briefly say which is their favourite figure and why.

Pray over your nativity sets and the symbols of our world today.

Loving God, we are your community, dispersed and hurting as we are. We are still your hands and feet on this earth, and a beacon of hope for our communities. Please guide us and inspire us to offer a welcome wherever possible, and to practise hospitality whenever we can. Show us new ways of being church, open our eyes to the needs of our community, and give us the tools to make a difference. In your loving and strong name, Jesus. Amen.

Follow-up activity

Ponder further on the ideas about hospitality. How can the church fellowship be God's hands and feet in this current climate? If possible, arrange a conversation to take them forward in love and prayer.

