

Defining Moments

Week 1

Day 1

Read: Deuteronomy 30:19

Some moments in life are bigger than others. There are times and situations that have a way of defining who we are and determining the entire direction of our lives. At some point during all of our lives, we come face to face with a defining moment. We are beginning a series called "Defining Moments," where we'll be taking a closer look at some defining moments found in the Bible. A single moment or interaction can change an entire life.

Yet, these moments that define us are not always what we expect. We might be tempted to think that we can anticipate when these moments are going to happen or what effect they might have on us. The reality is that the moments that define us the most often catch us off guard. They come to us when we least expect them.

And when they do come, everything changes. Like a line of dominos, once the first one falls, the entire trajectory of a person's life changes. What these defining moments do is they offer people a chance to choose which road they will walk down with their lives. Sometimes we need to get shaken out of our regular routines and our comfortableness so that we can see where we are and where we want to go.

What we see all throughout the Bible is that when people encounter God they have a defining moments.

Sometimes they choose to follow a new path, a path that leads them closer to God. Other times, people walk away exactly the same. Defining moments give us an opportunity to choose between life and death, between walking closer to God or continuing on the same path.

The thing about a defining moment is that, if we're not paying attention, it's just another moment. Our hope for this series is that when our defining moments come, when we come face to face with God, that it won't be just another moment, but it will be something more.

As we approach Christmas, we'll be looking at defining moments found in the Bible of when people come face to face with Jesus.

What have been some of the defining moments of your life?

Defining Moments

Week 1

Day 2

Read: Luke 1: 26-38

Right from the beginning of Jesus' life, he caused people to have defining moments. We don't often think of the Christmas story as a collection of defining moments, but all throughout people choose how they will respond to Jesus.

Perhaps the first person to encounter Jesus and have a defining moment because of him was even before he was born. Perhaps one of the most famous teenagers in all of history is Mary, Jesus' mother.

An angel comes to a young Jewish girl who is engaged to be married. The angel tells Mary that he brings good news. The angel said that the one God promised would come, the person who would restore the nation of Israel and all the world was on the way. The only thing is, for Mary, there's a catch.

While the news that the angel brought would have been received by almost every Jewish person as a message of great joy, for Mary it was life-altering. The news the angel brought, the foretelling of Jesus' birth, is something that changed all of history. We still, two thousand years later, celebrate the news the angel brought.

Yet, Mary's first thought was much more mundane. The angel is spelling out what the news meant, that Jesus would be the great king from heaven that the nation of Israel had been waiting for. All the while, Mary is working out the logistics. She's supposed to become pregnant with Jesus, but Mary is a virgin.

You can almost see the angel smile. Don't worry Mary, he says, with God all things are possible.

Mary comes to her defining moment and her answer is, "May it be to me as you have said."

Now, I'm not sure if anything would have been different if Mary decided not to go along with

God's plan. I don't know if anything would have changed if Mary would have asked the angel to find someone else to be the mother of God's chosen one. I don't know what effect it would have had if Mary complained instead of agreeing to be Jesus' mother.

But what I do know is that Mary, without knowing all the details, allows God to work in her life. Mary, with more questions than answers, agrees to allow God to be God, not just of the universe but also of her life. And in Mary's life, just like in our own lives, the defining moment of allowing God to work is vital.

Like Mary, have you ever said to God "may it be as you have planned"?

Defining Moments

Week 1

Day 3

Read: Matthew 1: 18-25

Mary wasn't the only one affected by Jesus even before he was born. Mary was pledged to be wed to a man named Joseph. The truth is, the Bible doesn't tell us much about Joseph. There are only a couple of snapshots of Joseph, but everyone of them tells the same story. Joseph was a righteous man.

After a short period of time it becomes obvious that Mary is pregnant. Joseph knows that he isn't the father and he also knows that if he makes a fuss about it Mary would be subjected to ridicule at best, stoning to death at worst. It would have been entirely within Joseph's right to desire revenge for being wronged. It would have been understandable for Joseph to drag Mary's name through the mud.

Yet, Joseph's plan is to walk away quietly. His plan is to slip away so that Mary wouldn't have to suffer any undignified treatment.

It was then that Joseph had his own angelic visitor. The angel tells Joseph that Mary hasn't cheated on him or gone behind his back, but that Mary is pregnant because of the work of God. The son she is going to have, the angel says, Joseph is to name Jesus, because he will save people from their sins.

Just like Mary, Joseph listens to the angel and follows what he says.

We might not be able to picture what it would have been like to live in a small town in the ancient world, but we can envision the sort of gossip that swirls around children that are perceived as illegitimate. Surely Joseph wasn't the only one to notice Mary's belly grow. Everyone knew to whom she was engaged to be married. Everyone would have assumed the same thing that Joseph had assumed, that Mary had gone behind his back with another man.

And when Joseph decides to stay with Mary, when he decides to stand by the child and to take him as his own, you can imagine the sort of reaction that would have brought. I wonder if Joseph could hear their snickers behind his back. I wonder if he could hear their jokes. I wonder if, when he looked into the baby's eyes, he second-guessed the vision and the angel and the heavenly pronouncement that Mary hadn't cheated on him after all.

Yet, through it all, Joseph stood by Mary and by Jesus. When Joseph came to his defining moment, he decided to be a righteous man. Even when that choice was uncomfortable, he still did what he knew was right.

When have you made a decision you knew was right, but that lead to more hardships?

Defining Moments

Week 1

Day 4

Read: Luke 2: 8-20

Anyone who has ever owned a nativity scene or has ever seen a play about the nativity knows who all the main players were. There was Mary and Joseph and Jesus, of course. There were animals in their stables and a star shining bring in the heavens. There were angels singing in the skies and shepherds watching their flocks by night.

I wonder if we ever give those shepherds much thought. Could you imagine having your normal work duties interrupted by something so extreme as a chorus of angels showing up? Their first reaction (actually, this is the first reaction of almost everyone who comes face to face with an angel in the Bible) is to be terrified. Once the shepherds settle down enough to hear what the angels are saying, they realize that they have been invited to take part in one of the most important events in history.

For the shepherds, their defining moment came in the form of a tiny baby sleeping the arms of a nervous teenager.

They left that barn carrying good news with them in their hearts. They knew that they had seen something amazing and they seemed almost unable to contain that information. Everywhere they went they spread the word of what they'd seen, what they had been told by the angels, and what it meant.

They could have just gone back to the fields, congratulating each other for their good fortune at being in the right place at the right time. But instead, their response was to spread the word.

When we come to our own defining moments, how do we react? Are we more concerned with our own good fortune that God would work in our lives, or do we want other people to experience that same work in their own lives? Are we content to live out our own defining moment, or do we want other people to experience it too?

How willing are you to talk about the way that God is working in your life?

Defining Moments

Week 1

Day 5

Read: Matthew 2: 1-12

The last defining moment we'll be looking at this week is with the three kings, also known as the three Magi. They were following the famous star to where Jesus was born, but before they visited him, they wanted to follow proper procedure. As with any traveling dignitary, they stopped in to consult with the current king.

The Magi visited with King Herod, who is known mostly for his extreme and lavish building projects and his vicious cruelty and ambition. Upon hearing that there was a newborn baby who was prophesize to be king, Herod smiles. He flatters. He tried to help the Magi find their way. On the inside, though, Herod was fuming.

These men, the Magi, are known throughout history as the three wise man, but I wonder sometimes if they deserve the title. Did they not anticipate Herod's reaction? Did they not see how the existing king might not be thrilled about hearing that a new king is entering the scene? Knowing Herod's reputation, couldn't they have anticipated how he would respond to hearing that a new baby king has been born? Either way, the Magi leave to visit Jesus.

Herod tells them that after they are done visiting with the baby king to return to him so that he, too, can find out where the baby was and worship the new child king as well.

The Magi, seeing now what Herod really wants, do not return to Herod after they visit Jesus, but return home another way.

This is the first act of civil disobedience Jesus ever caused. These wise men came face to face with a defining moment. They could either obey the powerful and vengeful King Herod, the one who was in power over them. Or they could protect the child king, the baby born in a barn.

In the midst of their defining moment, the three Magi decide to protect Jesus. The consequences to them for this choice were very real. But they chose Jesus over the power of this world.

Herod also had a defining moment. Jesus, the very Son of God, was born right under his nose. He could have gone and worshipped the boy. He could have sought Jesus out so that he could bend his knee to him.

Herod does search the boy out. In one of the most brutal events recorded in the Bible, he orders the slaughter of any male child in the area of Bethlehem under the age of two, hoping that in the mass murder he would also kill the newborn king.

The Magi chose the power of God, while Herod chose the power of this world.

Have you ever made a decision between tangible power and success and God's will for your life?

**Defining Moments
Week 1
Small Group Guide**

1. What do you think a defining moment is?
2. Have you ever had a defining moment in your life?
3. What was the situation under which you've had a defining moment?

Read: *Luke 1: 26-38 and Matthew 1: 18-25*

4. Like Mary, have you ever said to God "may it be as you have planned"?

5. In the face of a defining moment, have you ever made a choice that we for God, but that lead to other hardships in your life?

6. As we approach Christmas, what are other aspects of the Christmas story that are defining moments?

7. When people come face to face with Jesus, it often leads to a defining moment. Have you ever had a defining moment because of Jesus?



Defining Moment
Week 2
Day 1

The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!"

When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. Turning around, Jesus saw them

following and asked, "What do you want?" □

They said, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?"

"Come," he replied, "and you will see." □

So they went and saw where he was staying, and spent that day with him. It was about the tenth hour.

John 1: 35-39

We are in the second week of a series called "Defining Moments" where we've been looking at how a single moment can change the direction and trajectory of a life. Throughout this series, we'll be taking a closer look at how people from the Bible found their own lives changed because of an interaction they had with Jesus. Last week we look at people from the Christmas story that came to a defining moment because of the birth of Jesus.

We will begin this week by looking at defining moments that came when Jesus first invited his disciples to follow him. In the beginning of the book of John, one of the four books in the Bible that give a biography of Jesus' life, describes how some of Jesus' followers first met and interacted with him.

Yet, these stories aren't the grandiose encounters we might expect. The first two of these followers began by simply walking behind Jesus to see where he was going. It almost seems like these two men are trying to sneak up on Jesus without being caught. Jesus turns and confronts them.

“What do you want?”

That’s an odd question to ask of someone, but even more odd when the speaker is Jesus. What *did* they want? Why were they following Jesus down a dusty road like two children sneaking out of bed at night? I wonder if even they were sure what they wanted. What they said, finally, was that they were curious where Jesus was staying.

Maybe what they were really curious about was who Jesus was. Maybe they wanted to know if it was possible that Jesus was the person they, and all of Israel, had been waiting for. Maybe what they were really wondering is if they could meet Jesus and if they could be known by him.

Jesus tells them to come along and they would find out where he was saying. And in that statement there was an invitation to know him and for them to be known by him.

They spent the day with Jesus. And just as casually as that, they had a moment that would define the rest of their lives. Jesus had given them an invitation to know him, and it changed everything.

Have you ever felt invited to know Jesus? Have you ever felt a deep desire to be truly known?

**Defining Moment
Week 2**

Day 2

Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which, when translated, is Peter).

John 1: 40-42

Andrew, one of the two men in the interaction noted in Day 1, just couldn't keep the news to himself. He had the invitation to spend the day with Jesus, to know and be known by Jesus. But good news is hard to keep quiet. The Bible notes that the very first thing Andrew did after his initial interaction with Jesus was to find Simon, his brother.

When he finds Simon, he blurts out his good news.

"We've found the Messiah," he says, and it's easy to see the excitement he is feeling. We've found the one we have been waiting for. We've found the one that everyone has been waiting for. The nation of Israel had been looking and waiting for generations and finally, we've found him.

It's hard to know how Simon reacted, the Bible doesn't tell us, but I would bet he was skeptical.

If there is anything that we know about Simon throughout the Bible is that he is not hesitant to voice his doubtful and sometimes cynical nature. But he goes with Andrew to meet Jesus.

This interaction, much like the first we've looked at this week, doesn't go the way we might expect.

Jesus takes one look at Simon and decides to change his name.

Can you imagine? Someone takes one good look at you and decides that the name your parents choose for you needs to be changed. One look and you learn that the name you've used to identify yourself your entire life is inadequate. We don't normally articulate it very clearly, but to a large degree we identify who we are by our names.

Jesus looks at Simon and calls him Cephas, which is translated Peter. The word Cephas means "rock" and Jesus wants Simon to be known by this appellation. Jesus wants everyone to know, not the least of all Simon, that he see something in him on which he can depend, on which he can build. Jesus wants Simon to know that he not only has a new name, but a new calling.

The same can happen to us. When we come to Jesus we might not get a new name, but we do get a new mission and direction for our lives. That new direction and mission is often a defining moment for our lives, just as it was for Simon, now known as Peter.

What do you think is the significance of Jesus changing Simon's name? How can a new name (or

identity) give a sense of mission and direction?

Defining Moments

Week 2

Day 3

The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me."

Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

"Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. □

"Come and see," said Philip.

John 1: 43-46

Once again we see people who aren't able to contain the good news that they had met Jesus. Much like Andrew, Philip searched out and found someone to tell. Philip searches and finds Nathanael to tell him that they had found the Messiah, the one they'd been waiting for.

Nathanael's reaction is less than enthusiastic. In fact, the first thing Nathanael does is make an ethnic joke about Nazareth, Jesus' hometown. Can anything good come from a place like Nazareth, he

says.

Philip doesn't worry about defending Jesus or talking down the joke. He doesn't worry about correcting Nathanael or the implied insult against Jesus. The only way the Bible tells us Philip responded was with an invitation very similar to the one he'd received from Jesus himself.

Come and see.

"Just come and see and make up your own mind." Philip doesn't have a deep theological conversation. He doesn't try to answer any questions. He actually doesn't even give much of an explanation as to why he thinks Jesus is the Messiah. He only invites Nathanael to come and see for himself.

In the end, this is the only invitation any of us can give to others about Jesus. We can talk about Jesus and our faith. We can try to answer questions. We can try to learn theology. Actually, I think we should do all these things.

But, in the end, the only thing that we can truly do is invite people to meet Jesus for themselves. Here at CCC, we want to be a place where people can find their way back to God. And so our invitation is the same as Philip's, come and see for yourself who Jesus is and what he might mean for your life.

Have you ever been invited to "come and see" Jesus for yourself? Have you set aside your doubts enough to come to Jesus and to meet him?

Defining Moments

Week 2

Day 4

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false."

"How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. □

Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel."

Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that." He then added, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

John 1: 47-51

Philip invites Nathanael to come and see Jesus for himself, to make up his own mind about who Jesus is and what it might mean. You get the impression that Nathanael is skeptical, but he goes along with Philip anyway.

As they walk up to Jesus and before Nathanael can even say a word, Jesus introduces Nathanael to the crowd of people gathered there. Nathanael, who had never met Jesus, didn't even get a chance to say

his name before Jesus turns to the crowd and begins to brag about him.

"There is nothing false about this man, he is a true Israelite," Jesus says, pointing at Nathanael.

Nathanael is taken aback. It's not everyday that you're introduced to a crowd by a complete stranger. "How do you know me?" Nathanael asks.

Jesus explains that he saw Nathanael sitting under a fig tree before Philip called him. Jesus knew Nathanael. He knew who he was. He knew the kind of character he had. He knew his strengths and his weaknesses. And once Nathanael realizes this, he began to praise Jesus as the Son of God.

You can almost see Jesus smile. "That's just the beginning," Jesus says. "You believed because of something small, like knowing you were sitting under a fig tree a couple minutes ago. You just wait and see, because you are going to see things that will blow your mind. You're going to see things you won't be able to explain or even understand. You will see heaven open and you will see angels coming and going. Nathanael, this is just the tip of the iceberg. You are beginning a great adventure that is going to amaze you."

A simple invitation to come and see for himself had turned into the single most defining moment in Nathanael's life. And Jesus assures Nathanael that he hasn't seen anything yet.

Have you ever made a statement, much like Nathanael, that Jesus is the Son of God? What thing, event, or experience brought about that

realization?

Defining Moments

Week 2

Day 5

After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.

Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Luke 5: 27-32

Levi had a bad job. Ok, it was a really bad job.

He was a Jewish man living under the rule of the Roman Empire, an empire known around the world for its brutality, extravagance, and subjugation of lesser nations. And how did Rome pay for all their wars of conquest and all of the lavishness of the ruler's lifestyles? On the hard working backs of people like the Jews. And Levi's job was to collect those taxes.

No one likes tax collectors, in any age or society. But in the ancient world, the paycheck of tax collectors was determined by how much they could swindle over and above the actual taxes that were due. Tax collectors wouldn't just collect the required taxes, which to our standards were ridiculously high, but they would also gouge people above and beyond to make money for themselves.

Levi was a tax collector. He was a Jewish man who collaborated with Rome, the empire that conquered his people, to make a living. The only thing was, Levi wasn't a very good tax collector. He was a low ranking tax collector, as seen by the fact that he was sitting out at a tax table instead of going to where the rich people lived. He was a low level grunt.

One day everything changed. One day Levi came to a defining moment. One day Jesus walked down the road past Levi's tax booth and offered a simple invitation.

"Follow me."

The Bible tells us that Levi left everything and did just that: he followed Jesus. This might sound strange, that on a whim Levi would drop everything

and follow Jesus. But if you know what its like to be sitting in the middle of your life knowing that you aren't where you're supposed to be, you might also know what it feels like to receive an invitation to something more. When you get an initiation to new life, into something worth doing, into something worth investing all of your life into, it's actually pretty easy to leave all the rest behind.

Levi leaves everything behind willingly. From then on he is known as Matthew, and goes on to pen on of the books of the Bible about the life of Jesus. The direction of his life had changed in a single, defining moment.

In the end, when we come to our own defining moment with Jesus, we have to leave behind the old ways of things as well. It is, after all, the only way we can follow Jesus, by setting down the things we used to follow and instead pursuing Jesus and God with all our hearts.

This is the mission of Jesus: to invite all of us to follow him.

If you are following Jesus, what have you left behind to do so? Is there anything else you need to leave behind to follow Jesus more?

Defining Moments
Week 2
Small Group Guide

1. In the last year, what has been a defining moment in your life?

2. Why do you think defining moments are so vital to our lives?

3. No one seems to create more defining moments than Jesus. Why do you think this is the case?

Read: John 1: 35-51

4. The Bible reading for this week is all about Jesus' invitation to his disciple to follow after him. What are the similarities and differences between these stories?

5. Jesus gives the simple invitation to follow him. What do you think it meant for people during the time of Jesus to follow him? What did they gain? What did they leave behind?

6. In what ways is the invitation to follow Jesus relevant to us today? What do you think that invitation means for us today? What do we gain? What do we leave behind?

7. Have you ever felt truly invited to follow after Jesus, to know him and to be fully known by him? How would you respond to this invitation if it was offered today?

Notes: