

**EPIPHANY SUNDAY, JANUARY 5, 2020**  
“Responding to Change” (*Matthew 2:1-12*)

It feels only appropriate that on Epiphany Sunday, I would be sharing two epiphanies in my own life - moments when it felt as if a light bulb had turned on: what hadn't made sense suddenly became more understandable.

The first was during a class on Family Therapy. The professor explained that the family functions as a system in which each member has a role to play. The middle child like my sister, Eleanor and my partner in ministry, Warren, may be the peacemaker; the eldest like my brother, Keith, may be the leader, the organizer; the youngest like me may be creative risk takers, not adverse to challenging authority. In dysfunctional families, one member may act out in a wide variety of ways to bear the pain and anxiety of the whole system.

All of that made sense. What took me by surprise was how a family system responds to change. Even a positive change, such as when a distant, seemingly unemotional parent begins expressing feelings or a bullying sibling starts showing empathy or an alcoholic spouse takes steps to stop drinking. I had blithely assumed the family would rejoice. But no, the system is so built around each member performing their usual role that it resists change, that it almost pushes the parent, the sibling, the spouse back into their old behaviour - anything to regain its balance. I sat there dumbfounded. The light bulb went on. I began to understand what I had been experiencing in my own family and seeing in others.

The second was during a workshop on change. You don't need me to tell you that we are living in times of rapid change. Think of all the changes my Mom has seen in her 103 years: when she was growing up near Vineland, there was

no running water or electricity on the farm; a trip to the CNE was a major excursion, an orange in her Christmas stocking, an amazing treat. What I hadn't appreciated is how differently we human beings respond to change. The workshop leader explained it this way: some of us are change/change people who would be happy if they never knew what to expect when they come to church - if one week, there was a meaty sermon, and another, silence broken by short scripture readings and Taize chant; one week, questions for discussion, and another drama or liturgical dance. Some of us are sameness/sameness people who find one change every fifty years more than sufficient. People like my first cousin Mary who has been attending her neighbourhood United Church for sixty years. She is unhappy with the current supply minister who wants to introduce new hymns and different versions of the Lord's Prayer. In between, there are change/sameness people and sameness/change people - an entire range who are more or less comfortable with things shifting. As I studied this continuum and decided where I would be, I thought: no wonder, organizations and groups like congregations have such a struggle with change - some members may be complaining that everything is happening just too slowly while others may feel rushed; there is much more to talk about, to consider before any action is taken.

Both these epiphanies may shed some light on the story today in Matthew. A star has appeared - a star of wonder, a star to herald a life changing, even world changing event - the birth of new king. How will people respond? Well, the gospel writer offers us at least two possibilities in the persons of King Herod and

the magi. Let's focus first on Herod. Herod, whose father was named ruler by the Romans, came to power in 37 BCE. He became a tyrant, willing and able to remove his rivals by violent death. He even had one of his wives and three of his sons killed to secure his throne. Talk about a system going all out to preserve its balance! So it comes as no surprise that word of the star, of a newborn king brings him no joy. His every instinct screams to destroy the child, to eliminate the threat, even it results in the death of innocents, in what in this day of drone attacks would be labelled "collateral damage".

As we look around our world today can we see anyone who reminds us of King Herod? How about Bashar al Assad? He looked so promising; there was hope that this man who hadn't expected to succeed his father as President, who had been studying medicine would be a transformative figure, propelling Syria into the twenty-first century. He talked a good story: he spoke of democracy as "a tool to a better life." In 2011, he promised a national dialogue and new parliamentary elections, but then he insisted on holding onto power even as his country descended into a full scale civil war, even as civilians along with soldiers were being killed, while approximately 6 million people were driven to seek refuge outside Syria and a further 6 million were internally displaced. Bashar al Assad in striving to hold onto his position has proven to be an even more brutal and oppressive dictator than his father.

It is hard to change systems whether in the first or the twenty-first century, whether in the middle East or right here in Canada. When Justin Trudeau and the Liberals formed a government in 2015, it was against the backdrop of a promise

both of electoral reform - no more first past the post - and of “sunny ways” - no more business as usual with nasty attack ads and partisanship in which party supporters were rewarded with plum posts and preferential treatment for their companies. Well, we know what happened with that - no electoral reform and the SNC-Lavalin / Jody Wilson-Raybould affair. As one political analyst observed, Trudeau promised to be different, but he didn't pursue the institutional reform that would make that possible. The system won.

King Herod is hopeful his system of power and repression will triumph over the threat of a newborn king. But he hasn't reckoned with God and the magi. The magi are star gazers. They lift their eyes from the nitty gritty of the day-to-day to study the heavens, and relate what they observe with events on earth. They are like the eagles in our congregations. Are you familiar with this animal analogy? There are beavers - doers who work hard to make sure everything functions; monkeys who inject the essential element of fun and celebration; owls who offer wisdom based on study of scripture, tradition and experience; giraffes who dream dreams while keeping their feet firmly planted in reality, and eagles who soar, seeing the big picture, noticing where God is already at work in the community, the world. Who are the eagles in Sharon-Hope?

The magi not only notice that God is doing a new thing, but also are ready and willing to respond even though it means leaving home - the safe and familiar, the known and loved - and setting out on a journey of unspecified length and undetermined destination. Not unlike the Hebrew people, following Moses out of Egypt into the wilderness where they would wander for forty years or the fishers,

James and John, Simon and Andrew, setting down their fishing nets to answer Jesus' call and walk with him.

Does this setting out on an indeterminate journey remind you of anything in your own life? As children, we learn to deal with conflict. Some of us become skunks who throw tantrums and once we find our words, raise our voices in angry words of blame. Some of us become turtles, withdrawing into silence, hiding out, lying low until the storm has passed. While these ways may serve us well as children, they are not so helpful in adulthood. As I learned in my course on Family Therapy, we need to discover how to stand our ground without spraying; how to find our voice and state out truth in ways that others can hear. This might involve using "I" statements like "I feel x when you said or did y." At first, when we practised this in class, it seemed very artificial. As we continued, and kept refraining from "you" statements especially those coupled with "never" and "always" - those two great fight words - it became more natural.

Does this setting out on an indeterminate journey resonate with your life as a congregation? You have had an interim minister and a transition team to help you reflect on your common story, strategic anchors and your Mission/Vision Statement. You had Credence working with you to provide leadership coaching and meet with the congregation for both learning and conversation. You have a sense of how you wish to move forward as you join in God's ministry in this part of the world. Next Sunday, you will vote on calling a minister. You have done a great deal of work, but it is not over yet. Ahead lies a living into your

vision, your commitment to working together with one another and your new, called minister.

Like the magi, we may notice the new; unlike Herod, we may be ready to embrace it. Still, change doesn't happen overnight. It takes time and a willingness to journey for the magi to arrive at the place where they present their gifts. It takes time and a willingness to try new behaviours and reform systems before real change can happen within ourselves, our congregations, our world. Thanks be to God who sends us stars to inspire. Thanks be to God who walks with us every step of the way. Amen.