It does not take us long, as children, to learn that life is full of rules. This discovery is usually made when we inadvertently and unintentionally break one of the rules we know nothing about. These can be rules about being at the table (“don’t eat your soup with a fork!”), or rules about bathroom usage (“remember to flush!”), or even rules about toy storage (“don’t leave your Legos where I can step on them!”). A significant amount of learning the rules comes from being told what not to do.

We are also reminded about rules that must be observed. These often fall into the area of etiquette (“be sure to say thank you!”), table behavior (“eat whatever they serve!”), or common courtesy (“don’t put your feet where people will sit!”). In addition to the rules about what not to do, there are a lot of rules about what you are to do.

Little wonder, when we are children - and when we have children and grandchildren - or when we are around children, they always seem a little frustrated. Being held accountable for something about which you know nothing, or being scolded for something done in complete innocence, or forgetting one of the untold numbers of commandments that, believe it or not, you were not born knowing - causes no small amount of frustration, which takes many forms.

When we are grown up - or as close as come of us get - we are reminded “that ignorance of the law is no defense.” As adults, pleading lack of knowledge doesn’t get you very far. And, as we enter those years when forgetfulness becomes a part of daily living, we finally are cut a little slack, even though we sometimes embarrass family members and others.
For the most part, rules are a good thing. It’s good to have some guardrails for living and what rules basically boil down to. Mark Twain reportedly said that “we should observe the rules when we are young, just so we have enough strength to break them when we are old.” Some of you must have observed the rules, because I love what you’re doing to them now.

As I was revisiting this old story of the wise men yet again, this time I was struck by how often the rules were broken in this story. You can’t blame them for their ignorance. They were, after all, “wise men.” You can’t blame them for a simple slip-up. Their actions were quite intentional. You can’t blame them for “not knowing any better” because they did.

And that goes for King Herod. He breaks rules with a depth and at a pace that makes your head spin. He lies, abuses his authority, and orders the extermination of children thought to be a threat to him. I’m quoting the Bible and not the New York Times.

Matthew’s telling of this story is strange—strange because it seems to go against Matthew’s purpose of writing a gospel for a Jewish audience. Non-Jews—strangers—dare we even say “foreigners”—are at the very heart of this story. They are seeking a new-born king—whose birth has been announced by a star that has guided them in their pilgrimage. Cut Matthew some slack: he didn’t know what we know about stars—that they don’t move. These wise men bear gifts to pay homage—literally to bend the knee—before the new king.

Matthew also states what everyone at the time knew: that King Herod was a skunk in royal robes. Herod’s record of abuse, corruption, and exploitation was fully public. Herod had cozied up to the imperial authorities at the expense of the people entrusted to his care. Herod’s incessant and voracious need for affirmation and approval was insatiable. Historians tells us that his ego was enormous and his grasp on power was absolute.

Now, if the wise men were following the star, that star did not stop over Jerusalem, but it did stop some five miles south of Jerusalem over Bethlehem. The wise men went to Jerusalem because they were following the rules. You do not ignore the current monarch. You let him know that you are in the neighborhood.

But their presence caused Herod no small amount of concern. A new king? A threat to his power and authority. Strangers knowing about it? What about his own intelligence and security apparatus? Why didn’t they know?

Herod instructs the wise men to continue their search and when they are successful to send him word so that he might join them in bending the knee before the newborn ruler. It was a total farce and yet another bald-faced lie told by Herod. Herod broke the rule of honesty. Still, the wise men answer that they will do as Herod commands.
The wise men do find the object of their searching. They present their gifts. They sleep and are warned in a dream not to keep their word to Herod. In their dreams, they are told to break a rule - the rule of honesty and keeping one’s word and they head for home by another road.

Herod soon comes to the conclusion that he has been had by the wise men and is infuriated. His rage and fear and exasperation take over and he orders the death of all children two and under in and around Bethlehem. There is no record in any historical record of the time that says this actually happened. It could be that Matthew is painting Herod in a more dubious light than even Herod deserves. Nevertheless, the idea of ordering the extermination of children still sends shivers down our spines.

Lots of rules and lots of rules being broken. Some rules broken for personal advancement. Other rules broken to follow a higher and more superior rule.

One of the lessons we were taught along the way was that in “proper society” one does not discuss religion or politics. All in all, it’s not a bad rule, especially during contentious time such as we are living in these days. Better to stay clear of potential arguments and disagreements and fractured friendships and stick with the safe and less divisive topics.

However, if we are to be faithful to the story before us this morning from the gospel, we cannot help but discuss religion and politics. The story of the wise men and Herod is about both.

Herod is king. He reports directly to the Roman authority. He has curried favor with Caesar and Pontus Pilate and all the “higher ups” that kept him in his office.

Herod is not going to be challenged by anyone - even an infant. Herod will take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that he remains in power. He will lie. He will cheat. He will issue inhuman and immoral declarations and expect them to be carried out without challenge. He will use others to accomplish his purposes as he sees fit.

Herod sees the wise men as potential associates in his endeavors. “Un-indicted co-conspirators,” if you will. “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.”

The wise men are in something of a crisis. If they disobey Herod, they are disobeying a legal authority. If they obey Herod, they are breaking a moral law by participating in whatever genocidal madness Herod has in store. Whichever way they decide, they are going to break a rule.

What they do, of course, is well known to us. They are warned of Herod’s scheming in a dream and they head for their home countries by another way. They defy Herod - they ignore the royal edict - they pay no attention to what Herod wants. They answer to a higher law - a law that instructs them to do no harm.
As far as we know, the wise men are not particularly religious people. They are scientists and philosophers. We don’t even know if they were particularly political. They simply knew right from wrong. They knew the more than sketchy reputation of Herod. They knew of his cruelty and his lust for power. They knew what Herod was capable of doing. And they headed for home by another way.

And that may be the lesson for us this Epiphany Sunday. In our world, in our time, we may be challenged to obey laws that are in opposition to the law of God. We may be told to regard some people as created in less than the image of God in which all people are created. We may be told that some people are naturally our enemies and must be treated as such. We may be told that some people, because of the way they worship and serve God, are less than those who worship and serve God in another way. We may be told that all of our problems are because of this group of people or that group of people. We may be told that some people are less than the rest because of who they love. We may be told that the poor are poor because they are lazy and don’t want to work. We may be told that teachers are not worth pay raises because they don’t work hard enough. We may be told a lot of things these days that simply are not true.

And now, the dilemma. What are we to do? Do we simply bow our heads and say that the government has ordained the law and we must obey? Do we put nation over God and say, in the words of an earlier generation, “my country - right or wrong?” Do we allow fear of what might happen to us to overtake us and silence us and paralyze us?

Or do we head for home by another way? Do we refuse to see anyone as not created in the very image of God? Do we see everyone, first, as our neighbors and not our enemies? Do we respect every religion and hold it as a doorway to understanding the enormous mystery that is God? Do we take responsibility for our own complicity in injustice and our own complacency with injustice? Do we care for the poor and advocate for the poor because that is what our Lord did? If we can do that, we ourselves become an epiphany - a manifestation - a showing forth of God to the world.

There are a lot of Herods in our world today. Are there still wise men and women?

There are lots of rulers who flex their muscles and expect others to cower. Are there still wise men and women? Wise girls and wise boys?

When Herod calls us to walk a road that inevitably leads away from God, the wise will head for home by another way.

For now and evermore. Amen.