

“All Life is Meeting”
A Sermon delivered by Rev. John Balicki
St. Luke’s Church, Wilton, Maine
January 4, 2026; Feast of the Epiphany

The story is told of an old English professor who visited a past student of his whose first child had been born recently. He presented the parents with a gift for the baby: a book, all wrapped in fine paper, tied with a bow. Imagine their surprise and bewilderment when, on unwrapping the gift, they found that it was a very old leather-bound collection of Shakespeare’s plays. They thought, What a strange gift for a baby! How odd. An old book, written in archaic language, given to a newborn who will not be able to read it for many years to come. And then they realized: The gift was not the book; the gift was the giver. The old professor had given himself. He had given the child that thing most precious to himself – his own love of language embodied in Shakespeare. His gift was an expression of his deepest joy at the birth of the child, his hope for the future of this new human being.

Our traditional story of the visit of the three wise men can be framed in similar terms. Men, likely somewhat up in years given their status, are bringing gifts for a child in a distant, foreign land. Many, including myself in sermons past, have dissed these guys for the most impractical of shower gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh? Men!!

Let’s do a deeper dive. Mary gave birth to a son. Despite that many people’s favorite carol is “Silent Night,” anyone that has been anywhere near the birth of a child knows that there is nothing silent about the experience. Giving birth is messy and dangerous. Today a mother dies in childbirth once every two minutes. In many parts of the world, it is the most dangerous thing a woman can do. According to Luke, Mary gave birth in a stable, surrounded by animals, with no midwife. She gave birth in what would be considered, even then, deplorable conditions. Perhaps the largest unnamed miracle of Christmas is that Mary and the child survived.

The reason they survived might have come in the gifts presented to Jesus by the magi. To explain these peculiar gifts, many have placed dubious symbolic meanings on them. Instead, it is much more likely that these gifts were extremely practical. Frankincense and myrrh have been used for medicinal purposes for over 5,000 years in places like India and Saudi Arabia. What seems clear is that men from the East might have understood these two gifts to have medicinal value. Frankincense and myrrh have a long history of use in traditional medicine for their anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial,

and analgesic (pain-relieving) properties. Modern research is exploring these effects and suggests potential benefits, particularly when the two are used in combination. Gold also has been used as a medicine for thousands of years.

Ultimately these gifts may have saved Mary's life and indirectly that of Jesus. This biblical "baby shower" valued Mary's life and her role as mother. This strange, cross-cultural event: astrologers from Persia, Babylonia, Ethiopia meet this Jewish family from Nazareth, currently in Bethlehem, in an out-of-the-way stable. How unlikely a meeting? Unlike anything else in our Scriptures really. What can we learn from it? What gifts do we have, practical or impractical, and to whom do we present them?

This strange meeting, this Epiphany, calls us to be open to God's guidance, whether it leads us to the place where we should be or warns us of what we must avoid. The "star" we follow will not be what we observe or calculate in the heavens, but the Gospel picture of all that Jesus said and did, and the qualities of character revealed in his life and teaching — especially his self-giving love.

Richard Rohr back in 2001 wrote this about the visit of the Magi:

"The Magi bring themselves and their assumptions on a perilous journey, and only then can they offer their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And it all leads to an encounter that rearranges their lives, their self-images and seemingly even their pocketbooks.

And in this offering, Rohr writes:

It is clear that God is primarily revealing not ideas, dogmas, moralities, but God's very self. ... Biblical revelation is a personal category of encounter, a biblical knowing, not just a classroom study. It is transformation more than just education. This is very different from mere revelation of ideas. In fact, it implies that experience is the very condition for revelation even to happen! We are involved in a personal encounter in the Bible. Vulnerability is therefore much more important than mere intelligence. As the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber put it, all real living is meeting.

"All real living is meeting"? What an odd choice of words. My experience has been that for anyone who has worked in business or government and attended untold "meetings" through their work careers, or even those who have attended any number of church, town government or school board meetings, that the mere mention of the word "meeting" produces accelerated heart-rate, palpitations, hives, or all of the above. All that because there is so often too little "meeting" at a meeting and instead is an

exchange of information that could have been done in other ways or bombarding each other with our own ideas without any listening. How can all real living be meeting?

Back to Richard Rohr:

“It is fairly easy to discuss and have opinions; it is much harder to be present to another and to meet them. The first allows us to maintain ourselves as we are; the second demands surrender and getting ourselves out of the way. The first is the nature of the ego; the second is the nature of the Spirit. ... “Language and group symbols we can control. Ideas we can police. The spirit of another only God knows. Epiphanies we have to wait for, discern, trust and honor. The word became flesh but, to be honest, we would rather just have the word.”

To boil it down, it is the difference between reading “What to Expect the First Year” or “The Simplest Baby Book in the World” and having a crying, pooping, hungry, cowlicky baby in your arms.

Our pilgrimage need not be as long as that of the Magi, for we can find him in any location now — especially in our neighbors in need. The gifts we bring may not be material gold and its like. The light that has come shines through us as we give our time, our care, our understanding. Of course, if we possess worldly treasures, we give them too. But our best gift to Christ, whether in church ministries or toward the least of those who belong to him, is in the offering of the greatest gift at a shower, a birthday or Christmas: it is the gift of ourselves, our souls and bodies, as a sacrifice to him who gave all in sacrifice for us.