Some of you may remember a “Far Side” comic that showed several dinosaurs smoking cigarettes, with the caption “The real reason dinosaurs went extinct.” The caption, of course, plays on the fact that there are other proposed reasons, so a question for you this morning: “What is the prevailing theory of why the dinosaurs went extinct?” [Pause; wait for the “asteroid” answer.] Yes, that is the prevailing theory, a theory that was put forward relatively recently — in 1980! It was popularized in a book entitled T-Rex and the Crater of Doom by Walter Alvarez, a professor of geology at the University of California-Berkeley. He was helped in developing that theory by his father, Nobel-prize winner Luis Alvarez (as well as with a couple of other scientists). As has occasioned many scientific discoveries, Walter was fascinated by an oddity, an anomaly. In his case, it was a layer of clay in the geological record, one that contained a particular element — iridium — that was only found in asteroids. Searching for answers led him to the asteroid-extinction connection.

Walter, aside from being an amazing scientist, is also a good musician — he plays a mean banjo. He is part of a singing group at UC-Berkeley—The Faculty Club Monks—of which I was also a part (as some of you know), and where we became good friends. We often stood together while singing “We Three Kings” at the Faculty Club’s and Monks’ annual Boar’s Head dinners — a semi-dramatic performance with the Monks surrounding the head table, where the “king” of the feast would be sitting.

Not because of the Monks, but through Faculty Club connections, I became friends with another of Luis Alvarez’s students — who was also a good friend of Walter’s. Richard Muller, rather than accompanying Walter down the geological path, pursued physics. A fascinating guy — brilliant, of course — with widely varied interests. For reasons I’ll get to in a minute, he received a MacArthur “genius” award, and used some of that money to self-publish a book, an historical novel called The Sins of Jesus — depicting Jesus as completely human, and who, because the Jews wouldn’t listen to him, fell prey to using tricks and deception to try to get his message across (Muller was an amateur magician!). But it’s another of Rich’s books to which I want to point this morning.
Because of Muller’s friendship with Walter Alvarez, and knowledge of Walter’s project on the dinosaurs, Rich became fascinated by the periodicity at which major extinctions occurred in earth’s history; that is they seemed to happen every 26 million years. Like Walter with iridium, Rich wanted answers. He discovered that the periodicity was related to a bunch of comets entering our inner solar system, and he set out to understand that. What resulted from his research was a hypothesis that our sun was part of a binary star system; the physical properties of such a system would explain the cycle of comets. The only problem with the hypothesis was that neither Rich, nor any other astronomer, has been able to find the other star. That inability to prove the hypothesis explains the theory’s, and the book’s, name: Nemesis: The Death Star. And it was THIS theory that was part of the reason he was awarded the McArthur fellowship.

Now, before your eyes glaze over, and you start looking at the back pages of the Prayer Book, I want to assure you that there is something here to do with our observance of the Feast of the Epiphany. And it’s not just the fact that Walter Alvarez and I sang “We Three Kings” together, or that Richard Muller has been in search of a “star”, although, clearly, I DID see those coincidences. The connection point is that of people in pursuit of something significant . . . indeed of scientists in search of answers. Clearly Rich and Walter fit the “mould” of scientists, and were interested in finding answers from things “heavenly”, but so were the magi of which we just heard.

What do we know about those visitors from the east? (For those of you who participated in my “Caroling 101” Faith Forum, there will be some review here.) We can draw a few conclusions from Matthew’s description. He calls them magoi, the plural of magus. A magus could have been: “(1) a member of a Persian priestly class; (2) a possessor of supernatural knowledge and power; (3) a magician; and/or (4) a deceiver or seducer”. In this context, the magi probably were astrologers — that is, ancient equivalents of my friends Rich Muller and Walter Alvarez. The magi were probably not kings themselves; the ascription of royalty to them was a later, Christian, addition, possibly in light of Isaiah 60:3—which we just heard as well: “And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising”.

There is also no evidence from the biblical account to believe that there were only three of them. This later Christian assumption comes from the number of gifts offered to the Christ-child. Likewise, there is no biblical evidence for the names commonly given the magi (Gaspar, Melchior and Balthasar). The first
literary reference that contains these names dates from the sixth century, from the pen of an Alexandrian Christian. Given all the "unknowns", it’s not surprising that at least some biblical scholars (like Roman Catholic Raymond Brown) think the whole story is an idealization, Matthew’s association of passages like Isaiah 60 and Psalm 76 with the story of Jesus.

Whether the account is factual or not doesn’t meant that it can’t be “true“. What we heard is of “seekers-of-truth”, seekers who use, as their point of departure, heavenly light. They saw the star, a star they interpreted as indicating something quite significant — a birth of a new King. And they set off on their journey to go to pay homage to that King. And, when they finally found the child, they were overcome with joy, knelt before him, and and gave him gifts. Then they left. Given such a brief encounter, after such a long trip, we have to wonder, “What did that star, that light, mean to them?” Clearly it was significant enough to have them embark on a thousand-mile journey. But what answers were they seeking? We can’t really be sure, since they depart from the story. But the fact that, when they met the child, they were overcome with joy suggests that whatever they were seeking, they found.

The Feast of the Epiphany emphasizes how Gentiles found something significant in Jesus, or to refer back to the readings from Psalm 72 and and Isaiah 60, how non-Jews recognized something significant in Zion. What drew the magi; what drew kings from Tarshish, Seba and Sheba — was light. The image that kept occurring to me as I was preparing for this morning was that of “moths to a porch-light”. I was reminded, too, of a picture I have hanging in my office. It is an aerial view of a solitary tree in the middle of the Serengeti desert, with hundreds of paths coming from all directions, converging on the single source of shade. Two alternate images of hope, of answers to questions: one answer is enlightenment, the other of rest and respite.

I know we all have our different questions to which we find the answer in Jesus; indeed our individual questions probably change from time to time. Sometimes we need hope in times of distress, and we find our companion in Jesus. Sometimes we need inspiration, and Jesus’ championing the marginalized provides that. Sometimes we need rest and we’re able to let Jesus share our yoke. So a question to ponder is what are WE seeking when WE see the light in the distance.

But the more significant question posed, I think, in our observance of Epiphany at Good Shepherd—especially now—is “What is the light that we shine
that can draw others?”. We are surrounded by seekers of various kinds; there are “kings” and “magi” in the neighborhoods around us. Some want answers to life’s significant questions and challenges. Some want fellow-laborers in the causes of justice. Some want a community of support, of acceptance. Some want help in the raising of children in these turbulent times. Some simply feel that there is something “out there” that can help provide meaning . . . but they don’t know how to tap into it.

Over the next several months as we move together more deliberately into the “Season of Discovery” that is part of the Priest-in-Charge process, we will be digging into what is that particular light that Good Shepherd shines. We know that we follow the star that leads to Christ, but we will reflect the light of Christ in our own particular way. We will be working to learn what that way is, and where it leads.

I doubt either of my friends, Rich Muller or Walter Alvarez, knew precisely what they would discover when they began to try to find answers on matters related to the heavens. The scientific method, however, demanded that they kept questioning initial theories and assumptions until they arrived at their respective destinations. Both of them succeeded in making earth-shaking discoveries.

I trust we’ll be as open, and eager to discover, as we work together on our journey.

Star of wonder, star of might
Star with royal beauty bright.
Westward leading, still proceeding
Guide us to thy perfect light.

Amen.