Some things never change

By Vernon Whetstone
Amateur Astronomer

Tomorrow we will sit down with our family and friends to a table that is overflowing with all those things our doctor has told us we shouldn't be eating and engage in that annual feast called Thanksgiving.

Ostensibly it is to celebrate and remember the Pilgrims and their journey to find religious freedom and to honor the Native Americans who helped them through that first year.

Here is something else I want you to think about. If you can still walk after that huge meal, go outside about an hour after sunset and look up at the sky.

If there is a bothersome and pesky streetlight blocking everything out, put the house between you and it and gaze up into the darkness of the night sky.

As you do, here is something for you to think about. That same sky, the stars and constellations you are seeing now, are the same stars and constellations the Pilgrims saw when they looked up.

Those same stars are just about in the same place they were almost 400 years ago when the Pilgrims landed in this country.

Now, I hope you have your binoculars dusted off because we are going to give them a workout this week.

First, tonight be outside about an hour after sunset looking to the southwest just above the horizon for the bright orange dot that is Mars.

Place it in the center of the field of view. The fuzzy blobs down and to the right are Messier objects. Things that French astronomer Charles Messier found while looking for comets.

The one on the bottom is M8, the Lagoon Nebula located right next to M20, the Trifid Nebula, and above the pair is a small star cluster M21.

In a telescope you would be able to see why the Lagoon Nebula is called that, it looks like an island with a lagoon in the middle of it; and the Trifid is divided into three parts by dust lanes.

Mars' location now is now where the Sun will be in about a month for the winter solstice, the beginning of winter. Tomorrow night, Nov. 22, the moon is where the Sun will be on the vernal equinox, first day of spring.

If you are a morning person, tomorrow morning, Nov. 22, will be a good day to be outside about an hour before local sunrise looking east for a nice pairing of bright Venus and slightly dimmer Saturn.

If you keep watching this pair through the rest of the week you will see them getting closer together until the mornings of Nov. 26, and 27, when they will be at their closest.

Binoculars will be very handy here.

On Tuesday evening, Nov. 27, an almost full moon will be just below the Pleiades star cluster and the next night the moon will be very close to the bright planet Jupiter.

If you miss Jupiter and the moon you will have another opportunity on Christmas night, Dec. 25, when they will be close again.

Perhaps you should start to think about that Christmas telescope now.

SKY WATCH: First quarter moon, Tuesday, Nov. 20, full moon on Wednesday, Nov. 28.

NEXT WEEK: More astronomical blathering.