

It's winter no matter what

By Vernon Whetstone

Amateur Astronomer

Well, we have survived halfway through winter. Sunday, Feb. 2, marks the halfway point between winter and spring. Feb. 2 is a cross-quarter day, or a day that is halfway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox.

In the modern Christian calendar it is called Candlemas, the day where all the candles to be used in the church throughout the year were brought in to be blessed. We also know it as Groundhog Day where the celebrated rodent, "Punxsutawney Phil" is brought out to see if he will see his shadow.

Supposedly, if he sees his shadow he runs back into his burrow and there will be six more weeks of winter. Not to rain on their parade or anything, but there will be six more weeks of winter no matter what the critter sees.

The quarter-days are Lady Day on March 25, Midsummer on June 24, Michaelmas on Sept. 29, and Christmas on Dec. 25. The other cross-quarter days are Beltain—or May Day—on May 1, Lammas Day on Aug. 1, and Samhain—or All-Hallows Eve—on Oct. 31.

Candlemas is a celebration of light, hence the association with the candles for the church.

I hope you have been following the moon each evening as it has grown from a very slender crescent into the half-lit first quarter moon tomorrow. This week is special because all five of the visible planets can be observed in the evening or early morning sky.

After midnight Mars makes an appearance and Saturn is up by 3 a.m., followed by Venus in the early morning sky by 6 a.m.

Mercury is best observed just after local sunset.

The first-quarter moon is high in the south and halfway between the moon and the eastern horizon you can't miss the very bright king of the planets, Jupiter. On Feb. 9, 10, and 11, watch as the moon catches up with and passes Jupiter.

At midnight Mars and Spica clear the eastern horizon and travel across the sky all night. On Feb. 19 and 20, the moon passes between the two. Saturn is up and visible by 3 a.m., and on the 21st the moon pays a visit to very bright Venus.

You might want to try for another planet, the outer gas-giant, Neptune, which will be near Mercury tonight and tomorrow night. If you can pull it out of the glow of the setting Sun it will be in the same binocular field of view with Mercury to the left.

SKYWATCH: First-quarter moon tomorrow night, Thursday, Feb. 6. Friday night the moon is between bright Aldebaran in Taurus, and the tiny star cluster, Pleiades.