Mon Dec 6, 2010     ORION RISING
An old friend has returned to our sky - the ancient constellation Orion the Hunter. You'll recognize him as he rises out of the east around 8 o'clock tonight: three bright stars close together in a row form the hunter's belt. In Robert Frost's "The Star Splitter," the poet begins by saying, "You know Orion always comes up sideways. Throwing a leg up over our fence of mountains, And rising on his hands, he looks in on me Busy outdoors by lantern-light." Orion does come up sideways, first his left shoulder, the star Bellatrix, and the hunter's knee, the blue-white star Rigel; then the belt stars come up in a line, followed by Orion's right shoulder, the well-known star Betelgeuse, and finally his right leg, the star Saiph. When I was young, I saw Orion, looking just as he does now, as did my grandparents, and their grandparents, and so on back for thousands of years.

Tue Dec 7, 2010     GIOTTO AND THE STAR OF WONDER
In the year 1301, the Italian artist Giotto di Bondone looked up into the sky and saw a comet. It was bright and glorious, but it had no name; centuries later it would be called Halley’s comet, in honor of the English scientist who figured out that this distant traveler from the outer solar system approaches the earth and visits our skies, on average, every 76 years. In 1305, Giotto painted one of his most famous frescoes, the Adoration of the Magi, which can still be viewed in the Arena Chapel in Padua, Italy. Above the Creche, Giotto painted Halley’s comet, portraying it as the nativity star. Could the comet have been the star? This weekend Indian River State College’s Hallstrom Planetarium will investigate, in its eighteenth annual presentation of our holiday program, “Star of Wonder.” Shows are on Friday night at 7 and 8 pm, and on Saturday afternoon at 1 and 2 pm. Call the IRSC Box office at 462-4750, between 11 am and 3 pm today through Friday.

Wed Dec 8, 2010     BUYING A TELESCOPE FOR CHRISTMAS
Telescopes are popular as Christmas presents, but you can spend a lot of money on a scope only to be frustrated by its poor performance. To start, I recommend binoculars, which are inexpensive, durable and lightweight. Mounted on a camera tripod, you can aim them like a regular telescope, and the images are right side up. Next I’d suggest looking at a catalog company, such as Orion or Celestron or Televue or Edmund Scientific. These companies all have websites and can be found with most search engines. But there’s not much time left if you want a telescope shipped for Christmas. If you go to a local store, reflectors that use mirrors are usually better buys than refractors. The telescope eyepieces should be one and a quarter inches in diameter, not the hard to use kind that are just under an inch across. Look for a sturdy scope mount with good clamps - avoid cheap plastic and aluminum parts.

Thu Dec 9, 2010     SKYWATCH ON THE NET
WQCS has broadcast my Skywatch reports since 1995. This spot is only a minute long, so I pack a lot of information into it, and consequently, it’s a lot to try to take in. So folks often ask if there are transcripts available. Well I’m happy to report that there are. Go to Indian River State College’s website at www.irsc.edu. Now look at the right side of the page and click on “Upcoming Events.” This takes you to a calendar listing of college activities, and there are some really good ones there too, from theater performances to bulletins about some great programs for our students. Anyway, scroll down, and on the right side, click on “Hallstrom Planetarium,” and you end up on the planetarium page. On the upper left side of that page, click on the “Skywatch” button, and you’re there. My thanks to Debbie Gibbons for her great work in making these transcripts available and to Michelle Abaldo and Madison Hodges, and especially Joe Lenartiene for getting Skywatch on the air.

Fri Dec 10, 2010     THE MAGI AND THE STAR OF WONDER
Tonight and tomorrow afternoon the Hallstrom Planetarium will feature its eighteenth annual presentation of the holiday show, "Star of Wonder". In this program, we use the planetarium to take you back in time and show you what the skies looked like from Judea over 2000 years ago. We’re especially interested in trying to discover the identity of the star of the Magi, the object referred to in the gospel of Saint Matthew. What kind of a star, or star-like object, could have guided the Wise Men – probably Babylonian skywatchers - on their journey westward across 600 miles of desert and mountains until their arrival in Bethlehem? Many natural phenomena, such as comets, meteors, and planets have been suggested as good candidates for “the star”. And tonight you can also get guided views of the moon and the planet Jupiter; members of the Treasure Coast Astronomical Society will be on hand to let you look thorough their telescopes, weather permitting.