



The Christian life is a journey.

*TrailNotes* speaks to forward movement, paying attention to the "landscape" we are passing through in this trail-laced, wooded hillside and valley, not to mention the world beyond. **TrailNotes** is an unfolding, ongoing journal of the people who share the trail with us and the things we're learning and doing.

**ELDERTALK: THE ESSENES** MATTHEW GODSIL



Mountains along the north shore of the Dead Sea with caves in which the Essenes hid the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The 400 years between Malachi and Matthew was a time for which we have no prophetic record. That does not mean that there were no significant events during this period. If we were to learn about what was happening during this time and the different groups that grew out of those experiences, it would add context to our understanding of how Jesus interacted with them during His ministry on earth. Some refer to this period as "the silent years." The period divides into six historical divisions:


The Persian Era (536-336 BC), the Greek Era (336-323 BC), the Egyptian Era (323-198 BC), the

Syrian Era (198-165 BC), the Maccabean Era (165-63 BC), and the Roman Era (63-4 BC).

In the previous articles that I had submitted to *TrailNotes*, I discussed two groups that are mentioned in the Gospels, the Sadducees and the Herodians. These two groups were similar in their adoption of Hellenism, first introduced by Alexander the Great, perpetuated by the Greeks. The basic premise of Hellenism is that man is at the center of the universe, and all things revolve around humanity. This was in direct conflict with the Jewish concept of God as the center of all creation.

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**SEPTEMBER 2024**

- 1** Pastor Eric Byrom preaching: I Peter 1:1-2. We will honor Sunday School teachers this morning.
- 4, 11, 18, 25** Wednesday Connect Groups, all ages, 6:30-8:00 pm.
- 5** Women meet to pray from 9-10 am in the Lion Room.
- 7** Men's retreat in Vermillion with Harvest Christian Church.  
GAMES REACH – the monthly tabletop game night, 6:30-8:00 pm.
- 8** Eric Byrom preaching on I Peter 1:3-5. 
- 14** GFC fall workday, 9 am to 3 pm.
- 15** Elder Matt Godsil preaching on I Peter 1:6-9. Important church meeting at 6:30 pm regarding adding to the Eldership.
- 21** Family Fun Night, 6:30-8:00 pm.
- 22** Eric Byrom preaching on I Peter 1:10-12. 
- 29** 5th Sunday Celebration Worship

## The Essenes *(Cont. from p. 1)*

The next group that I would like to look at was conflicted with the encroachment of Hellenism in Israel. We refer to them as the Essenes. The name “Essenes” was given to the group by historians and scholars. It is an English translation of names used by ancient Roman scholars, such as Flavius Josephus and Pliny the Elder, who referred to them as “the pious ones” or “the modest ones.” The Essenes used various names for themselves, including “Men of the Community” and “Members of the Covenant.”

The Essenes are never mentioned in the Bible alongside other Jewish sects that existed at the time, such as the Pharisees. This could be due to their adherence to seclusion and dedication to keeping their rites a secret from outsiders.

What we seem to know is that the Essenes were mostly men, but in some of the most recent excavations we have found some female bodies. Previously, it was thought that the Essenes were completely made up of men and were almost completely driven by priests.

The Essenes believed that because the temple system under the Hellenized Sadducees and Herodians had become so corrupt, they needed to remove themselves from that system. They retreated to the desert near the Dead Sea in a place called Qumran. Their purpose was to prepare for the return of God, as He brought ensuing judgment. The Essenes viewed the corrup-

tion of the temple system as a sign of the end of the world. Therefore, they went into the desert to prepare the way for God’s arrival.

### The Sons of Light



*One artist’s concept of how the Essenes might have appeared.*

The Essenes saw themselves as going out into the desert to become sons of light, turning against the corruption of the Hellenized Sadducees (viewed as sons of darkness), who were running the temple. However, it is thought that some of the Essenes continued to serve as priests, perhaps like Zechariah. Some scholars believe this because of Luke 1:80 (NIV): “And the child grew and became strong in spirit. He lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.” The child is John the Baptist, who is suspected of being raised in an Essene community out in the wilderness. Zechariah (John’s father) and other Essene priests continued to serve, as some could not turn their back on the call to the priesthood and their godly duty.

One of the passages that the Essenes clung to was Jeremiah 6:16, where Jeremiah says, “Stand at the crossroads, ask for the ancient paths and ask where the

good way is, and walk in it and you will find rest for your souls.” (NIV)

They believed that Israel would wake up and seek the path which was commitment to the text, to the Word of God. That is when they started to make copies of these scriptures on their own scrolls.

### The Dead Sea Scrolls



Most historians agree that it was the Essenes who were zealously devoted to the Word and recorded it with extreme diligence and precision on the scrolls. They went into the desert to know the path and to walk it. The path is the text of the scrolls. They devoted their lives to it. What we have found in the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls is that this devotion resulted in amazing accuracy of the text, which has led to the integrity of the translations of the Bible we have access to today. Experts have found that there was less than a 2% error in our translations based on the Dead Sea Scrolls. From 2000 years ago that statistic is extraordinary.

The other important passage associated with the Essenes, and they would use it all the time, is from Isaiah 40, “‘Comfort, comfort my people,’ says your God. ‘Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...’” Imagine how these priests would have gone out to the desert and how they might

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## The Essenes *(Cont. from p. 2)*

have heard this as their personal call: “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, ..., that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places, a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together.’” (Isaiah 40:1-5a NIV)

This was one of their staple passages and pointed to what they believed was their call and why they had gone out into the desert. The Scripture points to the Essene qualities we see in John the Baptist. Was John, son of an Essene priest, serving in the temple? Isaiah 40 seems to point to that possibility. And here is where the discussion of John the Baptist begins. His father, Zechariah, was a priest who ministered in the temple, and his mother was of the lineage of Aaron (Luke 5). Therefore it was entirely appropriate that John, when he came of age, would minister in the temple like his father, yet, instead, he “was in the desert till the day of his shewing unto Israel.” (Luke 1:80 KJV)

The Essenes were known for taking in children, but would “choose out other persons’ children, when they are pliable, and fit for learning and esteem them to be of their kindred, and form

them according to their own manner.” (Josephus, *Jewish Wars*. Book II, Ch. 8:2) John the Baptist from his youth could have been a member of the Essenes community, or at least taught by them.

The Essenes believed that if they just went out to the desert, God would arrive after 400 years of silence. Remember that Isaiah passage?—“In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places, a plain.”

They said, “That’s what we’re going out to the desert to do.” The very next line said, “And the glory of the Lord will be revealed.” They believed that if they stayed true to their call, God would show up.

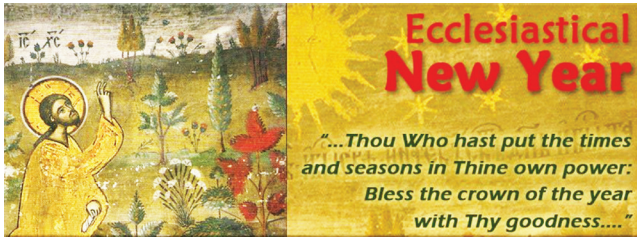
Let us contemplate the commitment of the Essenes to the path of the text, a highway through the wilderness. When God’s people do that, God will show up in a big way. We are invited by the Essenes to not only *know* the path of the text, but to *walk it out* in our daily lives. As followers of Jesus, can we commit to embracing the test, to memorize it, to chew on it? And then, walk it out through the wilderness? If we were to be that committed and devoted to the path of the text, would not the glory of the Lord be revealed in our midst? I challenge each of us to consider the preparation of “the way of the Lord,” for the Kingdom of Heaven is upon us.

## SOME RECENT GFC GLIMPSES



# HAPPY (Ecclesiastical) NEW YEAR!

JOHN KURTZ



Did you know that September 1 is considered the start of the new year for millions of our fellow Christians around the world? Well, it is and has been since 325 AD when that date was so decreed by the early Church Fathers at the First Ecumenical Council held in the ancient city of Nicaea, modern-day Iznik, Turkey. That celebration was, and still is, known as the Beginning of the Indiction. The term “indiction” comes from the Latin word *indicere*, meaning “to proclaim” or “to indicate.” It had actually been used by the pagan Romans for some years previously as a designated tax reporting period—sort of like we consider April 15 as Income Tax Day.

According to early church history and tradition, September 1 was considered to be the date on which Jesus read the words from Isaiah 61:1-2 and indicated that He was the One about Whom Isaiah had prophesied. Several actual Old Testament events also were believed to have taken place in what is now the month of September: Noah’s Ark came to rest on Mt. Ararat after The Flood, Moses came down from Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments, and the original Tabernacle of the Lord was built. More recently, it was in September that Constantine the Great was given the vision of The Cross bearing the words “*In hoc signo vinces*” (“*In this sign conquer*”), which told him that he would be victorious in the coming battle at the Milvian Bridge if he would only follow The Cross. He did, he was, and became a Christian as the result, and as they say, “the rest is history”—at least for a large part of the Orthodox Church ever since.



Constantine at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge: 312 AD.

Exactly how or why the Western Church—including those Protestants who adhere to a liturgical church year calendar—switched from September 1 (or thereabouts) to the beginning of Advent, which term comes from the Latin word *adventus*, meaning arrival—the Sunday nearest November 30 or four Sundays before Christmas—is not clear. The beginning-of-Advent date apparently became a part of Western Church tradition in the 5th century, becoming “official” church doctrine and practice in 581 AD at the Second Council of Macon in France.

So we relatively “non-liturgical” Protestants can take our choice, or choose to celebrate both dates as being significant in our “church calendar.” Jesus Christ, the Son of God became flesh that we who receive Him as our Lord might not perish but have everlasting life, He was so born, and He proclaimed it! “Happy New Year,” church family, now and/or at the beginning of Advent! We get to rejoice twice a year. Well, we should rejoice every day! He arrived. He proclaimed. Most importantly, in the words of the old hymn: “*He lives, He lives, salvation to impart! You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart.*”

## Grace Fellowship Church

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|                       |                         |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Eric Byrom            | Presiding Elder/ Pastor |
| Jadaé Fox             | Elder                   |
| Matt Godsil           | Elder                   |
| Jerry Mathias         | Elder                   |
| Cameron Karger        | Treasurer               |
| Lori Judd             | Missions                |
| Andy Heininger        | Worship                 |
| Judy Nichols          | Prayer Chain            |
| Kay Berry & Jadaé Fox | Office                  |
| Andy Anschutz         | Sound/Power Point       |
| John and Donna Kurtz  | TrailNotes              |