C.S. Lewis wrote a rather famous essay called *God in the Dock*. The gist of the essay was that in modern times humanity has changed the way it interacts with God. He says, “The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man, the roles are quite reversed. He is the judge.” He then continues this courtroom image by saying, “the important thing is that man is on the bench and God is in the dock.” The dock in this case is not the place where ships come in but is rather the enclosure where the accused sits during a trial. In other words, in our modern times, God must justify Himself to us. He has to tell us why He is worthy of our attention. And in an environment like this I find there is a reasonable amount of pressure for me to justify why I do what I do. And you probably hear it too -- why do I have to go to church, I can worship God when I walk the Ice Age Trail? Or my friend is a really good person, much better than people I know who go to church, are you telling me that they are going to hell? Or isn’t the only thing that matters is that we are nice to people? And so on. Since God is on trial, the church by extension is also on trial. Everyone has their own version of the divine and the way in which it should be engaged and so the church is always being asked to explain why it is a viable option. And today, being the first Sunday of Advent, it seems as good of time as any to explain why the church is not only a viable option but is the last best hope for humanity, because today in many ways is the beginning of the story.

So let me start by saying that to some extent I disagree with the question, that is the question of why do we need a church. In some ways it is like asking what ice cream sounds like. It is not a question fitted to the specifics of the situation. The reason I say this is because the question places the church squarely within the realm of any other consumer organization or product, and this is a place where the church was never intended to be. When we ask why we need Church or God we are asking the same question that is asked by someone who is pondering if they should use Bounce Fabric Softener and that question is, what will it do for me? With Bounce the question is will it make my sheets fluffier and smelling like a mountain meadow? With the church the question is will the church make some aspect of my life better? Will it make me smarter, taller, richer or have a better disposition? But there is also a second objection I have to the question and that has to do with the implied timeline. When we use a product, we expect the change to happen very quickly. We don’t want our sheets to be fluffier next month but rather as soon as they come out of the drier. These questions are centered on our demands and so in order for the church to exist it must do something that makes our life better, today, or that is at least the premise. And so, if we follow this question to its logical conclusion the way to judge the viability of Christianity is to go to church one Sunday and if you do not see a tangible result then you can happily and joyously conclude that there is not point to church and go back to sleeping in on Sunday mornings.

Now, if you have been wondering when I am going to get around to actually quoting something from scripture or maybe talking about Advent wait no further. As we know Advent is a season that is about preparing, preparing for the coming of Jesus. But the kind of preparing it asks for is not really tangible in the same way that preparing to cook Thanksgiving dinner is tangible. There is not a list to check off, rather is a bit more ephemeral a bit harder to quantify because of what we are being asked to do. Let me take a line from St. Paul today to show you what I mean. He says, “Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.” The two things for which he asks is that we increase in our love and that our hearts are strengthened in holiness. And if I may be so bold, I think this passage does a wonderful job of not just telling us what Advent is about but what our life in God is to be about – growing in love and holiness. In fact, I would go so far as to say that is the business of the church. But here is where it gets tricky in our day and age, it is not instantaneous. At the end of the day, we can’t quite say if we grew more holy or loving because it is very gradual and subtle. And this is the time where a certain modern type of person would throw up their arms and say what is the point of it all. “I went to church back during the Clinton presidency and nothing happened. I was not any holier.” But I think to get to what Church and worshiping God are for we need to get ahold of the idea of time. A consumerist question has a very short timeline whereas the church has an eternal timeline. So, things are not instantaneous.

There is an old philosophical question about when an item becomes recognizable as that item. For example, if I took four tires and asked you if they constituted a car, you would most likely say no. But if I attached those tires to an axel, you might still say no but it would be getting closer to something resembling a car. At some point in this little exercise enough items would be added that you would say it was a car, even though the moment it happens might be elusive. In many ways this is how it is when we grow in love and holiness. Will we recognize it in the short term, probably not, but at some point, it becomes who we are. In a world that wants instant results the Church is not really going to have much to say. When we are asked to justify ourselves in terms of what can it do for me today, I am not sure it can offer a whole lot. But the church is not built on human measurements, but rather on God’s eternal measurements. Is the person who walks in the woods instead of going to church a bad person? Well without delving too deep into the definition of “bad person” I would say no. But I would say that they are missing out, missing out on something greater. When I was in elementary school back in Fresno, I ran track with a kid who was really fast. He was faster than any kids on the track team by quite a bit. The problem was he had no discipline. Could he show up and beat most everyone? Certainly he could, but he never got any better. His natural skills took him quite far but he never achieved greatness because he never practiced. If he practiced for one day, would you have seen any results? Probably not but that is not how it works. Similarly, can the church justify its existence in a one-day horizon? Maybe, but you are not going to see results like you would with a bottle of kaopectate. Today on Advent I we are reminded of the journey. A journey where we are growing towards God across eternity so that we may be his, this day and forevermore.