E. J. Dionne writes about politics for the *Washington Post*. Earlier this week, he opened his column, writing,

*Christianity has been used over the centuries to prop up the powerful. But, from the beginning, the Christian message has been subversive of political systems, judgmental toward those at the top, and demanding of all who take it seriously.*

It is a powerful, hopeful and accurate account of our Christian tradition. Dionne used this opening to draw attention to a paper issued by Pope Francis one week ago, titled "The Joy of the Gospel". For Francis, this is his first major statement to his church and to the world, as he points to a new path for the Church’s journey for years to come. The document offers a profound summary of the gospels for our time. This is not a light-weight theological press release geared to 20-second sound bites on cable television. “The Joy of the Gospel” is 223 pages long, and in it Francis ruminates on the meaning of the gospels, the challenges facing the modern Church and the need for a “new chapter of evangelism marked by joy”.

Pope Francis has, in just a few short months, offered a number of tradition-rattling moments as he has set a new course for the witness of his church in our contemporary age. Clearly, among his primary concerns are those who are poor. Before being elevated to the papacy, in his home of Buenos Aries, he was known as the “Bishop of the Slums”. In taking the name of St. Francis, the 12th century saint who renounced his family’s wealth to live among the poorest of the poor, this Pope has clearly identified himself with those who have been cast aside by the global economy. Thus, we should not be surprised when Francis speaks thoughtfully and passionately on behalf of “the least of these.” [Matthew 25]

The world media immediately took note of a small segment of Francis’s writing. In “The Joy of the Gospel,” he decries the prevailing economic philosophy of the capitalist west, with its patterns of economic inequality throughout the world. He writes:

*To sustain a lifestyle which excludes others, or to sustain enthusiasm for that selfish ideal ... we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people’s pain, and feeling ... as though all this were someone else’s responsibility and not our own.*

Francis goes on to denounce “trickle-down” economics as “crude”, unsupported by economic facts, and responsible for the “globalization of indifference.” And then he offers one of his most telling – and brutally honest – lines from the paper:

*How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points?*

I found that particular line quoted in two very unexpected places. First, it was the featured quote in the Business section of last Sunday’s *New York Times* – an important sounding board for Wall Street interests. And then I found it in an online posting by the principal writer on pro football for *Sports Illustrated Magazine*. You have to admit, Francis has garnered some surprising media outlets.

Now it is true that not everyone has applauded the Pontiff’s words. Some have dismissed the report as “Marxist”, or a manifesto of the Occupy Wall Street movement, and a threat to the American economic way of life.

Certainly, one can disagree with the Pope’s political analysis and to perhaps question his economic perspective. But here is what you cannot do: You cannot argue that his conclusion fails to reflect the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. The call to alleviate the suffering of the poor is clearly stated in every era of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, from the earlier patriarch, through the prophets, and in the teaching and ministry of Jesus on through the writing of St. Paul.
In this season of Advent, we are looking at signs of hope promised in the coming of the Holy One. Last week we looked at the hope for the world. Next week we will look at the hope for the church and the last Sunday of Advent, Mary will talk about its hope for us. This week, our focus is on the hope for those who are the poor and the oppressed.

Psalm 72 is a call to prayer for a new king. This Psalm appears to have been composed for Solomon when he was elevated to kingship following the death of his father, King David, in the year 960 BCE. Psalm 72 describes the ideal king, the ruler who follows in God’s way of righteousness. And we cannot help but notice that the success of his reign is reflected in the way the poor are treated. The psalm says, that the king should “defend the cause of the poor and give deliverance to the needy”; (v. 4) he should have pity on the weak and needy, doing all he can to save their lives for their blood is precious in his sight. (v. 12)

Saving lives – spiritually and physically – is a primary concern of Pope Francis. Here is a key paragraph from “The Joy of the Gospel”:

[The commandment “Thou shalt not kill” sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, so] today we also have to say, “Thou shalt not kill” to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills.”

Illustrating the Pope’s point, we read this week that two city council members in Los Angeles tried to ban the feeding of the homeless in public places. It is an unsightly nuisance, they claim. They were not alone. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, more than 30 cities, including Philadelphia, Seattle and Orlando, have adopted or debated similar legislation.

The Pope’s message is blunt as it is correct. We have a global economic system allows people to die so that others may richly live.

The prophet Isaiah also talks about an ideal king, the chosen one of the Lord: “With righteousness, he shall judge the poor,” the prophet said, “and decide with equity for the meek of the earth”. [Isaiah 11:4] When Isaiah wrote these words, King Ahaz was less than ideal. His economic policy cut services to the poor.

In contrast, Isaiah paints a picture of a remarkable kingdom of wisdom, courage, and righteousness. The poor would be cared for by this righteous king who would seek equity for those who are without power. The result is a world at peace, where even the weakest in the community will be able to play with the most powerful of animals without fear of being hurt.

It is a remarkable concurrence that as we reflect on the ideal king, the world gathers to remember and mourn one of the most extraordinary leaders in world history. Nelson Mandela led his nation to a triumph over a deeply entrenched system of injustice, he helped move his country toward healing with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, exposing the horrors of the era of apartheid, and he forged the path of an inclusive and democratic future for the people – all the people – of South Africa.

The One who comes in the name of the Lord, the One whose arrival we await in the season of Advent, comes with a deep understanding of the life of those who are poor. He has a compassionate identification with the plight of those who live at the poverty level or lower.

In his coming, we take notice that this new king is born not in a palace but in the stables; not among the horses of the royal battalion, but with the cattle and sheep of subsistence living. The One whose birth we anticipate and celebrate was born among the poorest of the poor, who labored with his hands for much of his adult life, and then took to the preaching trail, living off the good will of others.

Because that is where he is from, because that is who he is, Jesus brings a profound hope to those who are poor and oppressed. His activity, his mission, his call, continues with his people. When we volunteer at Just Foods, with Family Promise, and at LINK, we carry out Jesus’ care for the poor. When we are generous with our blessings, through the Adopt-a-family, or the Deacons’ Fund, or through the mission giving of our church, we continue the vision for a righteous reign from the Prophet Isaiah and the composer of the psalms.

But this compassionate, peaceable kingdom meets resistance from the political and economic powers of our age. There are voices in our society who say that the state should do less to assist the poor, leaving that work to the churches, mosques and synagogues. And
no doubt these communities of faith could do more. But to suggest that houses of worship can fill in whatever safety net the state and federal governments cut, is unrealistic. According to Bread for the World, to meet that need, to match the proposed social service cuts, every congregation throughout the nation would have to increase their mission budget by $50,000 a year. Now we at First Presbyterian Church are large enough and generous enough, that we might be able to absorb such an increase. But a smaller congregation, such as the Clinton Presbyterian Church, or the Lawrence Jewish Center, certainly could not. And this increase would have to continue year after year.

The remarkable world that the biblical prophets and poets point toward is at the heart of the hope of Advent. Their vision challenges our imagination about the possibility of economic justice for all, about what such a world of justice, righteousness and peace would look like. They prompt us to wonder, what type of economy would sustain such a world? What would a righteous social system look like which provides for the weakest members of society?

And so, as we gather in this season of hope, what can we do? We can, of course, continue our generous support and our volunteer service. We can continue to pray for God’s kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven”. And we can advocate: we can write letters, call our congressman, we can draw attention – as Pope Francis has done – to ways our economic policy impact those in need.

And as we do so, we help fulfill the hope of Advent for the poor and the oppressed.

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iii Dionne
iv Peter King, MMQB, Sports Illustrated.com, December 2, 2013.
v Cassidy
vii Brennan Breed. “Isaiah and the Politics of Utopian Thinking (Isaiah 11:1-10)”; Huffington Post, 12/02/2013

This sermon delivered by
Rev. Kent Winters-Hazelton
First Presbyterian Church
2415 Clinton Parkway
Lawrence, KS  66047