The obvious choice for a sermon topic tonight is the parable of the prodigal son, but since we are doing that as a Wednesday night series I feel it would unfair to those who have diligently been doing their reading – like a teacher handing out the answer sheet right before a big test. The less obvious choice comes from Micah, but in light of the hysteria going on in the world these days I think it might actually be a better message. The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary describes this part of Micah in this way, “[It] begins with a lament over the decadence of society….The book ends with what is often identified as a closing liturgy, making the final transition from suffering to hope, from punishment to forgiveness.”

 I am always very hesitant to take a disaster and say that it is divine wrath for a certain behavior in our society and so please take what I am about to say more as an observation rather than an endorsement of divine wrath. The interesting thing that I have noted in what is now being called a pandemic is that the things being most directly hit are the industries, which exist mainly for our amusement. Sporting events are being cancelled, cruise ships are on lockdown and Disneyland is closed. Yes, Church services have been cancelled and there has been speculation over whether the Francis had been infected and was becoming a Pontifical Typhoid Mary, but mainly it is amusement that has been most severely impacted.

And here is the thing; I am not anti-amusement. I love to travel, I enjoy sporting events, but I do have to wonder if we have gone too far and if our addiction to amusement is masking a much deeper problem. For it seems that when amusement is taken away we find a panicked society incapable of what we call in children self-soothing. And this much deeper problem is what is addressed at the end of Micah when the prophet says, “He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and unswerving loyalty to Abraham, as you have sworn to our ancestors from the days of old.” And this may sound strange that the way this much bigger problem of angst and disquietude will be fixed is through the casting of our sins into the depths of the sea, but sin really is at the base of our problems for it is what alienates us one from another and from God.

I am sure that at one time or another all of us have been in some sort of physical pain and to help alleviate this pain we took some sort of drug. Depending on the severity of the pain this something may have been as mild as ibuprofen or as serious as morphine. The thing is no matter how much better it made us feel at the time, it did nothing to actually fix anything that was wrong, all it did was temporarily make our bodies believe that the pain had lessoned. The headache, or pulled muscle or broken bones were still there; we were just unaware of the problem because the sensors going to our brain had been temporarily restrained. And I have to wonder if something similar is going on. If our over reliance on amusement is the way to temporarily mask a much more severe underlying problem.

 Here are a few factoids to back up my pondering. Fact number 1: Between 2006 and 2018 direct spending on tourism increased by nearly 70%. Fact number 2: Since 1968 the average salary of a Major League Baseball player is up 20,700% And here is factoid number 3: Charitable giving to churches has declined from 53% of all charitable giving in 1987 to 32% in 2015. If where your treasure is your heart is also, this seems to indicate that we are seeking our salvation in amusement.

Will this crisis make us realize the Potemkin village that we have been inhabiting? Will it guide us to return to first things? I don’t know but let’s end with the prayer For the Good Use of Leisure

O God, in the course of this busy life, give us times of refreshment and peace; and grant that we may so use our leisure to rebuild our bodies and renew our minds, that our spirits may be opened to the goodness of your creation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.