So, we’re halfway through our sermon series we’ve called “Living Through the Storm.” Each week we have looked at a storm story from the Bible and how it speaks to what we are going through now in our world -- this pandemic and all that goes with it. Maybe you’ve grown tired of storm stories, and if that's the case I've got good news for you, we are through with the actual storm stories from the Bible. For the rest of this sermon series we’re looking at passages from both the Old and New Testaments that are not storm stories, but through which we may hear God's word for us today.

Last Sunday, as we finished up our second Drive-In worship service in the parking lot, I noticed something. After the service some people were getting out of their cars and looking for others to encounter -- hopefully wearing their mask and in a socially distanced way -- but watching them reminded me of something. This week I finally realized what it reminded me. It reminded me of how people looked when they came out of their homes after a snowstorm or a blizzard. When something like that happens, we hunker down to get through it, hoping the things will return back to normal quickly.

My most vivid memory of a blizzard a took place in March of 1993 when I was pastoring a church in Staunton, Virginia. We were expecting our second child, who turned out to be our daughter Cameron, and Pam’s due date was right when that blizzard hit Virginia. I grew up here in Atlanta, so I had never seen the kind of snow we had in the Shenandoah Valley that was so deep it blocked our front door. While we lived in Staunton, Pam worked as a TV news anchor at the Charlottesville station, so her doctor and the hospital we planned to use were in Charlottesville. But to get to Charlottesville from Staunton, you had to go over Afton mountain - - which was notorious for being dangerous when the weather got bad. As the blizzard approached and the weather got worse, the snow piled up. My thoughts went from, “Can we make it over Afton mountain?” to “Can we make it to the local hospital in Staunton?” When the weather got really bad, a church member name John Zinn offered to pick us up in his Jeep with the snowplow to get us to the local hospital. I remember waiting with Pam, watching one of the Batman movies in our home, and wondering when the labor pains would start and what we would do next. Thankfully, that did not happen until a week later when the weather was much better. But that was my most significant experience with an actual blizzard.

If you read my “Reflections” blog this week, you know I talked about how some have looked at this pandemic, describing it as either a blizzard, the winter season, or an ice age. The abbreviated version goes this way: when this pandemic first hit, most of us thought it would be like a blizzard -- something in which we all “hunkered down” to get through and which would not last that long until things returned to normal. But as this dragged on, most of us realized this is not a blizzard-like event which will be over shortly, and everything will return to normal.
So, some have suggested it is more like the winter season which is longer in duration. It may start with a blizzard, but it requires making plans to adapt to the longer event. For those of us in churches and schools, we are having to make plans based on what we are going to do in the fall - between now and the end of the year. However, there is also the thought that this may last even longer until the virus is tamed, and vaccines are widely distributed and become effective. And like an Ice Age, which is a very disruptive and life-changing event, things never really go back to normal -- how they were before. Some suggest 12 to 18 to even 24 months is a more realistic time frame. They encourage churches and others to make plans given this new “post-storm norm” -- even though no one knows exactly what that is going to look like because of the ever-changing, fluid conditions. Tomorrow night, our session will be looking at reflecting on each of these time frames. I would ask you to be in prayer for our session and our staff as we seek to discern God's will for the mission of our church in the coming months and years.

So, how might we think about our situation in the post-storm norm in light of God's word found in scripture? Last week, we talked about Paul’s storm story from the book of Acts. Today we are looking at Paul’s letter to the church at Rome and the passage which speaks about how we make it through the present difficult times. In which gives us hope for the future -- which is something we all need. In Romans 8:18-28, Paul writes,

> I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

In his letter to the church at Rome, Paul begins by talking about “our present sufferings.” He begins by framing these sufferings with the big picture -- eternal perspective -- saying that though our present sufferings are real, in the context of God's big plan, our present sufferings do not compare to the future glory in terms of magnitude. Paul is not saying our sufferings are not real, or that they are not painful -- yet, he invites us to keep them in perspective. Paul points out that our present sufferings are not just about us -- they affect not only those are around us, but all of creation. He even says that all of nature “groans” along with us in this suffering.

But, we see examples of this “groaning” in nature, don’t we? The tectonic plates shift beneath the ocean simply because that is what they do, and a tidal wave formed as result of the shifting.
The ocean wiped out in a single day as many people as the total number of American soldiers who died in the entire Vietnam War. We know there is something that is not right with the planet, even though there is no one to blame. And of course, there is the pandemic. We see a world in pain that seems out of sorts and we feel powerless to make it all right. Paul says that creation “groans” and waits to “be set free from this bondage and decay.” (Romans 8:21, NRSV) Somehow our salvation and the salvation of the world and all of creation are tied up with each other. Paul writes, “For the creation waits eagerly longing for the revealing of the children of God . . . in hope that the creation will be set free . . .” (Romans 8:19, 21, NRSV)

After Paul talks about creation “groaning,” he then moves on to compare creation to a woman who is groaning while in labor. It is a curious image that Paul should choose. First of all, for those of you who have actually given birth, you may think that groaning is a little mild for the noises you actually made during the birth of a child. Clearly, Paul has never given birth himself, (if only it were just groans that one felt like expressing during those times!) But, for Paul to choose the image of a woman giving birth means something.

Paul could have said that creation groans like a wounded, dying animal. But in choosing to compare creation to a woman in labor, Paul is deliberately using an image describing a process that is presently painful, but which ultimately ends up in something good – new life! That is the goal of birth – to bring new life into the world.

When Paul compares creation to a woman in labor, I think Paul is saying that creation is groaning now, but that God’s purpose is to one day restore this creation to a new creation. That is really what the resurrection of Easter is all about. It is more than just eternal life beyond death. It is about God’s plan to bring the kingdom of God on earth – which includes a new creation. It may be painful now. There may be suffering, but eventually God’s plan, begun at Easter, will work its way out and there will be new life – not only for us as individuals, but for the whole world.

So, how do we respond -- particularly as Christians? In the midst of this pandemic which brought all sorts of suffering, what do we do first? What I think we do first is what Paul describes here -- we groan. We groan. In our Old Testament we use the word “lament. In our Old Testament there is the book of Lamentations. Some have suggested that almost one third of the Psalms express lament -- the most familiar of which is Psalm 22, which Jesus quotes from the cross saying, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Paul uses the word groan, not only to describe what creation does awaiting redemption along with all of humankind, Paul also talks about the Spirit of God that helps us in our weakness. And when we're at that point where we are suffering and struggling so much that we cannot even put it into words and only groan, God through God's Holy Spirit prays along with us in wordless groans and intercedes on our behalf.

For us, this may be the most comforting part of this whole passage. We don't have to know the right words to say to God in prayer -- all we have to do is groan. And as Christians, I believe our first response to suffering is to lament and groan. When we are confronted with suffering and we don't know what to say, sometimes the best thing to do is to say nothing at all, to simply be
present and allow God to be present through us with those who are suffering -- maybe we groan -- believing that God is groaning along with us through God's Holy Spirit.

But after groaning and lament comes what I would call love. And while lament and groaning are certainly acts of love, I also believe that God calls us to be guided and filled with God's Holy Spirit in order to serve others in the name of Christ. As we've said before -- love is a verb -- it is something we do for others. I believe that lament should always lead to serving others in acts of love.

If you look back at the history of the Christian faith, you will find that from the very beginning Christians were the ones who did not run away, but who stayed and cared for those who were sick and dying. When something like a plague hit, the rich and powerful headed for the hills. But it was the Christians who stayed behind to care for those who are suffering. And until fairly recently in history, that was not the job of the state or other institutions, but the work of the church -- which is why many of the older hospitals have religious beginnings. Because Christians followed Jesus who suffered and gave his life for others on a cross, they too -- we too are willing to go as far as even to risk our lives in caring for others, because we trust in a God of the big picture. We do what is best for those around us, not what is foolish but what is genuinely best for those around us to show the neighbor-love of Christ. So, we lament and groan and love -- but we do not do this alone. We do this together as members of the body of Christ.

You may have heard the story of the story of Redwood trees. If you have ever been out to one of the national parks on the west coast, you may have seen these great trees. Most of us have at least seen pictures. They are so huge that you can drive a car through their hollowed-out trunks or hold a dance on their stumps. The trees can reach heights of 300 feet. You may have heard that in most trees, the roots often go down as far as the tree is tall. But in Redwoods, that is not the case. They actually have very shallow root systems that almost lie on top of the ground. If a tree is 300 feet tall, the roots often go out as far as 900 feet. With these shallow roots, then why don’t they fall down when the winds and storms come? Why? Because of the “grove factor.” The trees growing in close proximity to one another -- in groves -- helps them stay upright. The roots get tangled up in the roots of other Redwood trees, growing together and getting all intertwined. That creates a stabilizing root system that helps each tree continue to stand. A lone Redwood growing by itself wouldn't last that long, but one in a grove can last for a thousand years. What holds the Redwoods up really is that they are all in this together.

I want to close with a quote by Eugene Peterson from his book, A Long Obedience in the Same Direction. He says this:

God is running the show. Neither our feelings of depression nor the facts of suffering nor the possibilities of defection are evidence that God has abandoned us. There is nothing more certain than that he will accomplish his salvation in our lives and perfect his will in our histories. . . . Our life with God is a sure thing. When mountain climbers are in a dangerous terrain, on the face of a cliff or on the slopes of a glacier, they rope themselves together. Sometimes one of them slips and falls -- backslides. But not everyone falls at once, and so those who are still on their feet are able to keep the backslider from falling away completely. . . . Traveling in the way of faith and climbing the ascent to Christ may
be difficult, but it is not worrisome. The weather may be adverse, but it is never fatal. We may slip and stumble and fall, but the rope will hold us.

Friends, God is still running the show – even in this storm, and even after this storm in the post-storm norm -- whatever that will be. And we may slip and fall, but the rope of God’s love and grace will still hold us. You can count on it! In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.