From the wilderness of errors and confusion, the people journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?” We are like our ancestors, journeying through the wilderness. The crisis was real for the Israelites. They were in the wilderness. They were desperate. Something was missing. They were making their way through the desert and they had no water to drink.

We can sympathize with them. They had been traveling into a strange, foreign land since the night of the Passover. They witnessed one of the most bizarre supernatural events as Pharaoh’s army chased them to the shores of the Red Sea where the waters were parted. They had walked deeper into the wilderness for several weeks. They carried all of their possessions on their backs. They carried little children and even the sick on their backs. They had no idea of their destination. They had no idea of the way forward.

The Israelites needed water as they made their way through the wilderness. They were forgetting and quarreling. They had forgotten the story of the first 15 chapters of Exodus. In the first 15 chapters God saw them being oppressed by the Egyptians. God sent Moses, the greatest prophet in the history of Israel, to lead them. Then God launched an assault on the Egyptians to convince Pharaoh to free the Israelites. God led them through the Red Sea and destroyed the Egyptian army. God gave them food in the wilderness.

But they needed water. The crisis was real. They began to quarrel with one another, with Moses and with God. Moses’ people had a relationship with God, but it often seemed to be a fragile or shallow relationship. The Israelites had forgotten all of the chapters of the story that led up to the present moment.

They did not understand the big picture. We are sympathetic to the struggle of these people, walking through the desert with no water to drink; they cannot see the big picture. They do not understand their journey through the wilderness is an important part of God’s story, but it is just a part of the story.

They were God’s chosen people. They were rescued by God, but something was missing. They forgot. They forgot God had been leading them all along. They forgot God had been providing for them. They forgot the time when God placed a pillar of cloud between them and the Egyptian army. They did not understand that their lives and their work were a small part of God’s vision and God’s work. Sometimes they treated God like God was a supporting character in the story of their lives.

The same is true for us. We are like our ancestors, the Israelites; we are in the wilderness. For many of us, more than any other time in our lives, we know we are in the wilderness. We are in a wilderness of confusion, fear, anger and grief. Something is missing for us.

Our lives are full; especially at the present moment. Our lives are full of worries and activity. Our heads are filled with images of wildfires and flooding. Our hearts are full of distress, distress at the violence, distress at the danger of the pandemic, distress at the lack of civil discourse. Our hearts are broken from images of violent encounters among citizens of our communities and between police and the people they are sworn to protect and serve.
We are like the Israelites in the wilderness. We face many challenges. The challenges are real. We are making our way through a dangerous time. Sometimes we grow frantic. We quarrel with one another.

Our lives are full but something is missing for you and me. We are missing a deeper relationship of strength and resilience with the one who made us. Like our ancestors, we have a relationship with God; sometimes it just seems to be a fragile relationship or a shallow relationship. Sometimes, when things aren’t looking promising, we give up on each other and we give up on God. At the time when we especially need to be turning toward God and turning toward one another in love, we turn away from one another and we turn away from God.

We are like Moses’ people in the wilderness; we are forgetting. Even those of us who have long, deep relationships with God sometimes forget our lives are an important but small part of God’s vision. We forget that our stories are part of God’s story.

We can tell much about our relationships with God from the kinds of prayers we say. Sometimes our prayers are focused completely on ourselves, like this: “Dear God, we are in terrible shape. You’ve got to help us. This person is dying. This person is sick. We are in very bad shape. Help us.” In our prayers we sometimes show no appreciation for, or understanding of, our place in God’s creation. Sometimes we show no understanding of our place in God’s work of justice and love.

We are like Moses’ people in the wilderness; we do not understand the big picture. We have been trying to do the right thing for years. We have been struggling for justice and equality for all citizens of our nation for decades. We have been working faithfully to build the kingdom of heaven for generations. We do not understand that our mission is not to get the job done; our mission is to love deeply. Our mission is to love those around us, to love our neighbors as ourselves.

The needs we face are real. The fears we face are real. We will not move past the fears by being more demanding of others or of ourselves. We will not move forward in the ways of love and justice by turning away from the one who gives us our vision of love and justice.

As it was for the whole congregation of the Israelites, the people of our nation are travelling through the wilderness and something is missing. We are afraid. We are forgetting the one who brought us to this place. Sometimes it seems we do not understand Jesus’ commandment to his disciples to love one another as a sufficient and complete rule for each day of our lives.

So, though we seem to be lost in the wilderness of sin, we pray to be people who do not waste our energy quarreling with others. Though the needs are very great, we pray to be people who turn toward God and turn toward one another in love. Though hundreds of thousands of our citizens have died in the epidemic and millions have lost their jobs, we pray to be people who remember it is God who has journeyed beside us all this way. Though this part of the story is the worst we have seen, we pray for strength in knowing God’s love will heal ultimately our divisions and lead us to God’s kingdom of peace and justice. We pray to rest and find strength in the love of God, beside us, behind us and before us.