

"FINDING OUR MOJO"

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Remember the feeling as the odometer went awash in zeros after slogging 99,999 miles? Today feels a little like that, flush with new beginnings as we launch a new era. Mark describes John blazing on the scene to inaugurate Jesus' ministry at his baptism. Don't blink as the odometer turns over. It goes in a flash. You can easily miss it. A lot like the hoping, yearning and praying leading up to today. I celebrate what God has done in bringing us together. I hope today puts a big smile on your face. Are you ready to smile?

So what do we do first as we begin a long journey with someone new? The truth? We ask if he has a sense of humor. Say, we are driving to Florida with someone new. Is this going to be deadly serious? we wonder. Or can we keep things light enough to enjoy navigating great distances in close proximity? It's one of our first questions. Maybe that's because those who take themselves too seriously don't get far. After all, if we pay attention, life is humbling. Maybe it's because when we don't have a sense of humor, we are usually too full of ourselves. And when we are full of ourselves, we leave little room for God.

Then again, having a sense of humor is like having fresh breath, believing you're a good driver, or seeing yourself as smart. In each case, we already think we are, whether we are or not. So here goes nothing. Seeking an image to capture our new start, it just came to me. As I prayerfully pondered my message for today, seeking divine illumination, I heard a voice. It was no prophet, seer or saint; no angel or apostle. It was Austin Powers in his second film. "Hey baby, I can't find my *mojo*." You might recall Powers defeats Dr. Evil because of his *mojo*. Of course, *mojo* is a phrase borrowed from the blues. Beyond human attraction, *mojo* is no less about life force, finding your essence, bringing the right stuff.

Dr Evil has traveled back to 1969 and stolen Austin's *mojo*. He and Felicity must recover it to save the world. Losing his *mojo* has reduced Austin to a simpering shadow of his James Bond bravado. Again, it's not just about attractiveness, but also getting his strut back, finding your confidence, leaning into life rather than getting rocked on your heels.

I hear what you're thinking. Mojo? Isn't *that* a bit cheeky for a pastor? Guilty. Actually, the real problem is my humor gets so dry people don't know when to laugh. So today I declare blanket amnesty for laughter whenever the Spirit moves us. Cash it in on any Sunday. Seriously, thinking of the church as having *mojo* is perfect for our seven week sermon series on spiritual passion. I also hear you asking, what's the spiritual connection? Stick with me and I'll see that we don't get a spiritual hernia from too big a stretch.

At just the moment John the Baptist arose and Jesus stepped forward to usher in God's reign, Israel had lost its *mojo*. Israel had *so* lost its *mojo*. The best thing that happened to them in 500 years was Babylon coughing Israel up out of exile to return them to their homeland. They rebuilt the Jerusalem walls and temple but it was never the same again. Then Alexander the Great's Greece descended from the west like a horde of killer bees.

Their idea of religious tolerance was butchering hogs in the Holy of Holies to mock Yahweh. Then Caesar Augustus spread his wings like a giant bird of prey over the rude backwaters of Palestine. Rome crucified two, three, even five thousand men at a time along their roads whenever the Jews forgot their place. Never mind the grinding imperial forces from without. Israel's inner life was a void. For centuries, the voice of prophecy was silent.

In the Judaism of Jesus' day, it was generally accepted that with the death of prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi 400 years before, the Holy Spirit had ceased to speak in Israel. The only revelation in that spiritual wasteland was *bath qol*. In Hebrew, it means "tiny echo". Imagine, no rabbi claimed to hear more than a whisper or tiny echo of God.

To say Israel had lost its *mojo* is putting it mildly. As John the Baptizer emerged from the wild in a musty camel fur with his crunchy honey-locust diet, he evoked an old school prophet. He had a ring of authority. Folks flocked from the temple to hear his loud echoes in dry ravines. As John is described as "a voice crying in the wilderness", now you know how bleak that wilderness was; now you know why he cried; now you know how deeply his cry spoke to masses. John is Elijah back from the dead insisting God was putting right a lost and broken world. Were they hungry for that! Do you know anything about that hunger?

I think you do. For I've found that as any church goes through long-term interim waiting, watching and hoping, it begins to eat at you. You grope after your confidence. You long to recover your trusty *mojo*. It occurs even in the case of fine interim leaders like Dr. Don, the staff, and our trusty lay leaders. It isn't necessarily a bad thing. Our spiritual life, like the rest of life, ebbs and flows in cycles. In a down cycle, we rediscover spiritual hunger.

So how do we get our *mojo* back? Here we depart from the exploits of Austin and Felicity. The temptation is to move quickly, to market a whiz-bang personality—is that me?—or to promote glamorous gala events. But did John offer glamor? People clamored after core truth. People still do. We are not a TV network boosting ratings. We are a house of God looking to our spiritual foundations, as has happened many times in our 274 year history.

When I was 37 miles up the road in divinity school, one professor advised us as pastors how to find ourselves, if we felt a little lost. Mr. Muehl instructed us fresh-faced theologues that if we got two things right, the rest would take care of itself, even despite ourselves. His advice also holds for churches. Number one: *you need to be convicted by the gospel*.

What does that look like? Ten years ago in a confirmation class, I gave the youth 3 X 5 cards and invited them to ask any question they wanted, but not to sign their names. *Anything*. Nothing was off limits. That got their attention. Then I leafed through the cards, doing my halting best struggling to respond to real life hopes and struggles. Young people that age don't always show in their faces what they really think of you. Ever notice that?

The next day I played tennis with a confirmation father. His son mentioned I had joined them. How did it go? Dad asked. OK, the son said. Silence. What did the pastor have to

say? More silence. Moments later, the boy ventured, “You know, Dad. He seems to believe this stuff.” It is my most cherished praise in 32 years of ministry. Hey, consider the source. I am not posturing as hero with this story, just insisting: authenticity is essential.

Are we the real deal? Have we let God’s good news in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, get a hold of us? People notice if we have, and also if we haven’t. It can’t be only a lifestyle affectation. It can’t be a technique for a wholesome family. It can’t be stuff we embrace because somebody long ago said we should. It can only be the truth around which we arrange every other truth, the passion that makes sense of every other passion.

If the first thing is to embrace the message, the second is to genuinely care for others and demonstrate our concern. Of course, that begins right here. If we can’t thrive right here by mercy and grace, professing to love the world won’t matter. People always seek communities of full reconciliation because they hardly exist anywhere. And we all need one.

I remember visiting a UCC new church start near San Diego. They didn’t have a building yet. Their lot was all weeds. But they had a sign. Under the church name were the words, “Forgiveness is the highest form of love.” That will attract a congregation. That message is John preaching in that barren emotional wilderness of our universal yearning for God.

As we embody God’s reconciling love here, we’ll share it with the world. Our many mission partners with whom we meet and share funds will help us in this. But beyond these official relationships, we also need to get in the trenches at the front lines with forgotten and broken people in need, whether it is as close as Norwalk or as far away as Colombia.

Why? It’s all about *mojo*, baby! Let me translate that once again. In his book *The Rise of Christianity* writer Rodney Stark describes the countercultural appeal of the early church. In ancient Turkey, as towns were struck by plague, Christians reacted in ways unlike others. The rich, the well-to-do, and particularly the doctors gathered up family and possessions to leave town. They fled to the hills, to fresher and less polluted air, or to friends or family in towns at a distance. But the Christians—often the poor elements and many of them slaves--stayed and nursed those left behind, including ones who were neither Christian nor their own family members, nor in any other way obviously connected to them.

Sometimes people got well again. Sometimes they did not. Sometimes Christians caught the diseases and died from them. But the startling point was made. Graphically and unmistakably, the point was made: *this was a different way to be human. Nobody had ever thought of living like that before.* Why did they do it? They spoke of seeing in Jesus Christ that God’s true nature was self-giving love. Can you imagine? Stark suggests these behaviors help account for the rapid spread of Christianity. For despite the sporadic efforts of Rome to persecute the faith, nearly half the empire had become Christian. The emperors had little choice but to recognize that the Christian half was the winning half.

To close, we return to our Gospel lesson. As Jesus rose out of the waters of his baptism,

marking not just a new ministry but even inaugurating God's emergent reign, the heavens opened and a voice spoke: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Of course his ministry and God's reign were all about Jesus sharing his belovedness with all.

We'll know we've found our mojo as we experience ourselves as God's beloved children. We shall return to theme of our belovedness and the belovedness of all in Christ Jesus. For as know that belovedness, we can endure long silences, low cycles, even plagues. Our real mojo is living out our belovedness in Jesus Christ. Such a life can't help but brim with passion and celebration. Isn't that the church you want? Are you ready for some joy? Amen.

Show forth once again, O God, in power and peace what you have done in generations past and what you do now in our own day. In the ebb and flow of times down and times up, you create the hunger for you within us, and you satisfy that hunger of your people.

O God, before we can sing songs of gladness again, we find that we must relinquish old burdens, old hurts, old scripts. We have to deny fear its looming dominion over us. We have to remember that fear is the opposite of faith, and affirm that new histories can be written. As we learn to trust you and each other, you write those histories, God. Use us as your instruments of reconciliation and peace until we experience the assurance of that same belovedness Jesus' heard declared over own his life, baptized in your favor.

We give you thanks and praise that you have brought us to the threshold of a glad new season of life and faith; we are ready for our new diet of smiles and joy and laughter; we receive it as manna from heaven, putting behind us hungry wilderness wanderings.

We remember the homebound not here with us today; we remember those whose parting with us was difficult in recent years; we remember those who come back to give the shared life of this spiritual home another chance. Vindicate these prayers and all who pray them. Reveal yourself, O God, to all seekers at First Congregational. Bring us to your glory and move us on to new days; in the name of Jesus, who is never far away. Amen.