

MacNeill Baptist Church — 96th Anniversary Service

Texts: Deuteronomy 34:1–12; Matthew 22:34–40

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It is such an honor to be with you today as MacNeill Baptist Church celebrates its 96th anniversary. Anniversaries are meaningful moments. They give us an opportunity to celebrate what has been. With reflection, they allow us to consider what we have learned along the way—and perhaps how what we have learned might help us live differently. And anniversaries give us an opportunity to look ahead, to wonder again about what is yet to be.

I believe I've now preached for anniversary services in three Canadian churches. I don't think this makes me a Canadian Baptist yet—but I'm certainly honored to be among you today! And I'm especially glad to be here with my son, Joel. We're going to enjoy a little more of Canada before heading home to Ohio tomorrow.

On behalf of AWAB—the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists—our staff, Board of Directors, and more than 210 member churches and educational partners, it is my privilege to bring greetings and to celebrate with you. I'm grateful that AWAB has a growing presence in this part of Canada, including Burlington Baptist Church and First Baptist Church Guelph. And it was so good yesterday to participate in the Gathering of Baptists annual gathering. Bob, thank you for all your efforts to bring together everything that came together yesterday.

But MacNeill Baptist Church, I've come by today simply to say: thank you. Thank you for your witness. Thank you for your commitment to an inclusive and expansive understanding of God's love. Thank you for making room—for insisting upon room—for all God's children.

And I'm aware that less than a month from now, you'll mark another anniversary. It was Tuesday, November 18, of last year that MacNeill was officially welcomed into AWAB's membership. So there is much to celebrate: 96 years; nearly one year with AWAB; a long history behind you; and a future still unfolding before you.

Which brings us to Moses.

What Can You See From Here?

Deuteronomy tells us that Moses climbs Mount Nebo and looks out across the land. God says, in essence: *Look*. Look over there. Look north. Look west. Look south. Look at the land that has been promised. Look at what is ahead.

I have actually stood on Mount Nebo, in the modern-day country of Jordan. And I can tell you that it is impossible, literally, to see everything from there that Deuteronomy describes Moses seeing. But perhaps geography isn't really the point.

Perhaps the point is that Moses was given a glimpse. He could see something of what was ahead. He could see something of the promise. He could see something of a future that was larger than himself. But he could not see everything.

And isn't this how life is? We never get to see everything. We cannot know everything that lies ahead. We cannot predict our futures. We can plan for them. We can prepare for them. We can dream about them. We can work toward them. But eventually, we have to live into them.

When Susan and Monica and I were planning today's service, I mentioned that Joel and I hoped to explore some more of Toronto before heading home. Susan said that we might not be able to see all the way across the water to Cleveland—but we could still see across the water.

I liked that.

I live in Cleveland, right on Lake Erie. In fact, I can see the lake from my living room windows. And Joel and I will look out across Lake Ontario before heading home—and yes, I know, it is Lake Ontario!—and we'll see what we can see. We won't see Cleveland. But we'll see something.

And perhaps that is a metaphor for faith. Faith isn't always being able to see where we're going. Sometimes faith is learning to trust what we can see while entrusting to God what we cannot.

Corrie ten Boom once said, "Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God."

MacNeill Baptist Church, on your 96th anniversary, what can you see from here?

When you look out across the lake of your life together, what can you see? You can see 96 years behind you. Generations of people who worshiped here. People who prayed here. People who were baptized here. People who were married here. People whose lives were celebrated and remembered here. People who taught children and sang hymns and served meals and sat through committee meetings—some of them probably much too long! People who kept showing up.

You can see something of where you have been. And because of where you have been, perhaps you can see something of where God may be calling you next.

One of the dangers of anniversaries is that they can tempt us simply to look backward. And looking backward is important. Memory matters. History matters. The people who came before us matter. But the purpose of remembering is not simply to preserve the past. We remember so that we might live faithfully in the present and courageously into the future.

Moses had spent much of his life moving toward this moment. He had led people out of bondage. He had wandered with them through the wilderness. He had listened to their complaints and endured their disagreements. He had made mistakes. He had gotten angry. He had questioned God. He had questioned himself.

Moses was no perfect leader. He was human. And yet, through all of that humanity, Moses kept moving. Until finally he arrived at the mountain. And from the mountain, he could see something he had not been able to see before.

That is one of the gifts of a long journey. Sometimes the view changes because we have changed.

Ninety-six years ago, the people who founded MacNeill Baptist Church could not possibly have imagined everything that would happen in the life of this congregation. They could not have imagined the world of

2026—or how crazy some political leaders south of the border could be! They could not have anticipated every cultural change, every theological conversation, every challenge, every opportunity.

And I suspect they could not have imagined that, 96 years later, this congregation would stand proudly as a welcoming and affirming Baptist church, declaring through its life together that LGBTQ+ people are not merely tolerated, not merely welcomed at the edges, but are beloved children of God invited into the fullness of the life, leadership, ministry, and mission of Christ's church.

They couldn't see all of that. But here you are.

And now the question becomes: What can you see that those who come later you will one day inhabit?

There is something else about Moses' view from Mount Nebo that I find deeply moving. Moses sees a future that he will not personally enter.

That's difficult, isn't it? But it is also holy.

Because one of the measures of a faithful life is our willingness to work for futures we may never personally experience. That's what congregations do at their best.

We plant trees under whose shade we may never sit. We build ministries whose full impact we may never see. We welcome people we do not yet know. We challenge injustice

whose complete dismantling we may never witness. We create a church for children who haven't been born yet. We take courageous steps today so that someone tomorrow might find a place to belong.

That, MacNeill, is part of your welcoming and affirming witness.

You may never know the name of every queer young person who discovers that there is a Baptist church in Hamilton where they don't have to choose between their faith and who God created them to be. You may never meet every parent who breathes a little easier because they discover a church that will love their child. You may never know every pastor, seminarian, neighbor, family, or stranger who sees your witness and realizes: *Maybe there is room for me.*

But that does not make the witness any less important. Some of the most important things we do are for people we will never meet.

Moses could see the land. Joshua would enter it. Others would build homes there. Children would grow up there. Generations would follow. The promise was bigger than Moses. And God's future is bigger than any one of us.

The text tells us that after Moses, Joshua steps forward. There is transition. There is change. There always is.

No congregation remains the same for 96 years. Pastors and leaders come and go. Members come and go. Neighborhoods change. Communities change. Denominations change. Language changes. Our understanding changes.

And through it all, we keep asking: *What does faithfulness require of us now?*

Not what did faithfulness require in 1930. Not what did it require in 1960. Or 1990. Or even 2020. What does faithfulness require of us today?

Susan, as you look ahead across life's lake and prepare for new ministry, what are you seeing? What possibilities are coming into view? What is God inviting you toward that perhaps you couldn't see a few years ago?

And MacNeill, what are you seeing?

You are four years away from your 100th anniversary. That's quite a horizon. What kind of church do you want to be when you arrive there? More importantly, what kind of church is God calling you to become on the way there?

Perhaps there are things you cannot see yet. That's okay. Moses couldn't either. I couldn't see everything from where I stood in Jordan. None of us can.

Faith does not require perfect visibility. Faith requires movement. Faith requires trust. Faith requires courage enough to take the next step when the whole journey is not yet visible.

So, MacNeill Baptist Church, on this 96th anniversary, look back and give thanks. Remember the saints who built and sustained this community. Remember those who took risks. Remember those who changed their minds. Remember those who opened doors. Remember those who kept the lights on. Remember those who insisted that the gospel was larger than fear, larger than exclusion, larger than the boundaries people sometimes build around God's love.

And then—look again.

Look ahead. Look across the water. Look toward the horizon.

What can you see?

Perhaps not everything. Probably not everything. But what can you see?

Can you see a church becoming even more courageous in its welcome? Can you see new generations finding a home here? Can you see deeper relationships with other welcoming and affirming congregations across Canada and beyond? Can you see MacNeill becoming an even stronger witness in Hamilton to the expansive love of God?

Can you see people who haven't walked through these doors yet? Can you see ministries that haven't been imagined yet? Can you see a 100th anniversary four years from now when you will look back at this moment and say, *We didn't know exactly where God was taking us— but we kept going?*

I hope so.

And when the horizon is unclear, remember: You don't have to see Cleveland from Hamilton. You don't have to see the whole promised land from Mount Nebo. You don't have to see everything that is coming.

You just have to see enough to take the next faithful step.

And perhaps that is enough.

Because for 96 years, people called MacNeill Baptist Church have been looking toward a horizon they could never completely see. And still they prayed. Still they worshiped. Still they served. Still they loved. Still they moved forward.

And now you stand where they once looked.

And perhaps this is where the words of Jesus we heard earlier meet us once again. When Jesus was asked which commandment mastered most, he brought it all down to this: Love God with all that you are. And love your neighbor as yourself.

MacNeill, years from now—perhaps at your 100th anniversary, perhaps at your 125th, perhaps long after any of us are here—when others stand where you now stand and look back upon this chapter of your life together, what will they say about you?

I hope they will say:

They loved God. They loved their neighbors.

They loved those whom others found difficult to love. They made room. They opened doors. They looked toward a future they could not completely see, and they kept moving faithfully toward it.

May those who come after you someday be able to say:

They couldn't see everything that was coming. But they could see enough. They loved God. They loved their neighbors.

And they trusted God with the rest.

Amen.