

***In the Flesh***  
**Luke 1:39-56**  
**BAMF**  
**December 20, 2015**  
**Advent 4**

*<sup>39</sup>In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup>where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup>When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb.*

*And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup>and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup>And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup>For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup>And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."*

*<sup>46</sup>And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup>and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, <sup>48</sup>for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup>for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. <sup>50</sup>His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. <sup>51</sup>He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. <sup>52</sup>He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; <sup>53</sup>he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. <sup>54</sup>He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, <sup>55</sup>according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

*<sup>56</sup>And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home. (NRSV)*

During these Advent worship services, we've been dancing around with the idea of the Incarnation. "Incarnation" is a big word in theology that describes the coming together of God's life and human life in the person of Jesus. We Christians believe that Jesus was a unique person—there wasn't anyone like him before in history, and there hasn't been anyone like him since. He was a unique paradox: completely God and also completely human, 100% God and 100% human.

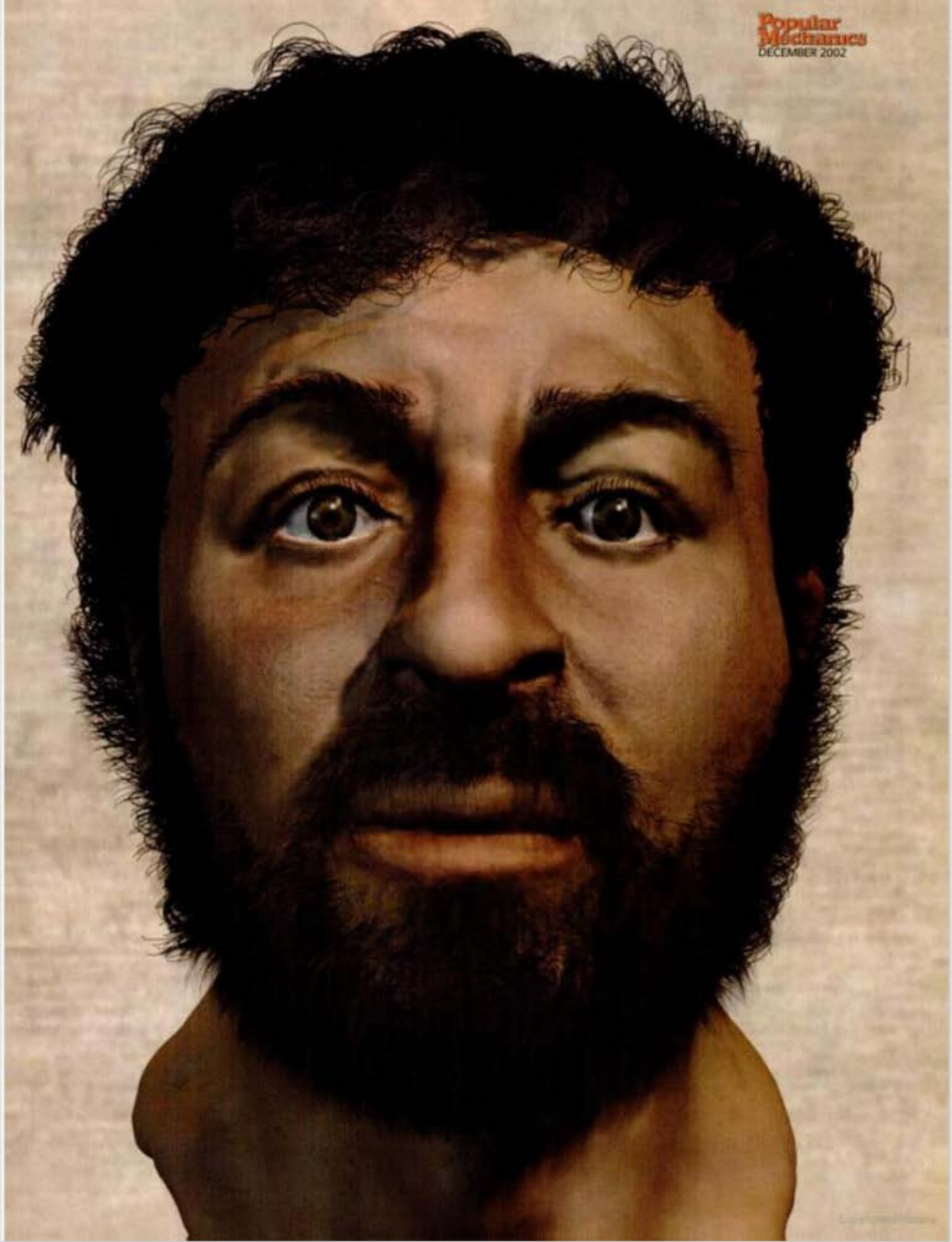
The word incarnation comes from the Latin word *incarnari*, which means "to be made flesh." Jesus was God who came to us in real human, Palestinian Jewish flesh. We don't know what Jesus looked like because no one ever snapped a photo of him, and if one of the original band of disciples drew a picture of what Jesus looked like, that drawing has not survived.

Recently a medical artist from the University of Manchester in England used the science of forensic anthropology to come up with a likeness of Jesus. Forensic anthropology is normally used to help solve crimes, but in this case the purpose was to arrive at a reasonable likeness of Jesus, using data from the remains of first century Semitic men. Here's a photo of what they came up with.<sup>1</sup>

Notice this is a Palestinian Jewish man, not a white, blue-eyed man as we in North America so often, and so inaccurately, portray Jesus. In the history of western Christian art Jesus is often imagined as a northern European man, but those portrayals likely miss the mark. Although this photo is still only an educated guess of what he may have looked like, it does remind us that Jesus was incarnated as a Palestinian Jew whose physical appearance resembled that of other Palestinian Jewish men.

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Fillon, "The Real Face of Jesus," <http://www.popularmechanics.com/science/health/a234/1282186/>, accessed December 18, 2016.



The Incarnation is for us a great mercy, a great blessing. In the fourth century a short, dark-skinned African man named Athanasius wrote a little book about the Incarnation. Athanasius was the bishop of the church in Alexandria, Egypt, and he was also an important defender of Christian orthodoxy. In this little book about the Incarnation, Athanasius says that God meets us in our senses—in our seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting. God comes to us from heaven in the form of a human body, in order to communicate with us in ways we can see, hear, touch, smell, and yes, taste. In Jesus, God became like us to communicate better with our senses.<sup>2</sup> Even today, we can still meet him in our senses by watching for him, listening for him, and so forth. In Jesus, God becomes real to us in ways we understand.

The Incarnation of Jesus was a unique event. And yet in another sense incarnation is not so unique. One of the distinguishing marks of Anabaptist-Mennonite spirituality is our accent on the presence of the living Christ inside each believer.<sup>3</sup> Underscore that: we Mennonites say the living Christ works from inside every believer. Every believer is like Elizabeth in this story, “filled with the Holy Spirit” (v. 41).

That means you can look for fresh incarnations of Jesus in the Christians around you. You might see him in the joy spread out over someone’s face. You can glimpse Jesus in the parent who stays awake with a sick child. You can identify him in someone’s act of service that expects nothing in return. You can spot Jesus in someone who makes peace. You will recognize him in those who care for refugees.

You can also look for him at this table of bread and cup. We Mennonites do not believe that the bread and cup actually turn into the body and blood of Jesus.

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<sup>2</sup> *St. Athanasius On the Incarnation: The Treatise De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*, trans. and ed. by a religious of C.S.M.V. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, 1944, 1946, 1953), 43.

<sup>3</sup> C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 65.

But we do say the bread and cup represent the presence of Jesus around us and in us.<sup>4</sup> In bread and cup, we can taste and see the living Jesus, incarnated among us and in us, here in this place.

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<sup>4</sup> *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, Article 12.