

'The Before Photo'

My friends and I play this game that I reckon a lot of people play and I wonder whether it sounds familiar? I'll ask them over to our house for dinner or to let our kids play or whatever, and suddenly realise that the house looks like a scene from Lord of the Flies. So in the little time I have before they arrive I run around the house like a maniac. Having actively hoovered up anything in my way, I then start collecting up all the tiny socks that must have been scattered like confetti, clean the toilets, and finish with a flurry of candle lighting. There are a brief few moments before our guests arrive that I verge on sheer aggression to anyone in our household who might threaten my now pristine home, but as the guests finally step through the door I utter what must be the most frustrating phrase for any co-resident to hear:

"Oh, please excuse the mess."

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There seems to be something in us that is drawn to the composed and the beautiful. If there wasn't then Pinterest and Instagram would be out of business. We don't just love order and flawlessness, we celebrate it. There are entire TV series based on the premise of self-betterment. One I particularly love flies in 'experts' to sort out the life of a nominee who has been struggling for one reason or another. They give that person a make over or a home renovation, and then leave them with all their new stuff thinking that they've transformed their life because they've given them anti-ageing cream. The nominee who was once genuinely finding life overwhelming is given a new look and some tools to make things less difficult and we, the audience, admire the better version of them.

It's all well and fair being impressed by the after results of a perfect home or a transforming makeover but what about the person before the improvements take place? Are they only now allowed to hold their head high because the hoover has taken a hit and some of their clothes got tailored? God is not like this. God is not an expert who drops by to make you appear a bit better for a moment, nor is He someone arriving with expectations of faultlessness. Don't get me wrong, God can and will totally transform lives, but unlike house guests and reality tv hosts, He's been there the entire time. He was always with you. I don't want those empty gods, the ones who force you to clean up before approaching them. I want the God who sits with you in the mess and speaks value into you regardless. In one of the books of poetry in the Bible, the book of Psalms (chapter 139), the author, David, writes:

"You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways... For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well."

What worries me is the idol perfection has become in our culture- being perfect is great so long as you never drop the ball. But imagine what it would look like if instead of exhausting ourselves in effort to be worthy, we leaned into the identity that God has already given us. Are you not tired of trying to constantly have it together? Is there not something inherent in each of us that is most beautiful in when it's honest and vulnerable? From what David said in the quoted passage, it looks as though God has created each of us with intent and worth. The writer praises God because he is *fearfully and wonderfully made*. That's not some bizarre boast of vanity, but simply awe of a God who creates and sustains us with extraordinary love.

If church and faith have never really been your thing, I'd encourage you to look at the rest of Psalm 139. In fact, even if it is your thing, I'd encourage you to still look at the rest of the passage. It's mind blowing that something written thousands of years ago speaks to directly into today's insecurities!

So in gratitude and relief I say: here's to messy houses and to a God who loved the Before Photo as much as the After.