

He was raised by a single mom struggling to get by in Placerville. He ate from tubs of peanut butter stamped with the words, "Property of El Dorado County." When the furniture was repossessed, his mom told him that she had decided to get rid of it because it would be more fun to "camp out" in the house.

His dad was an alcoholic who always had big plans and no wherewithal to carry them out. But he married his dad's dreams to his own work ethic and became the most commercially successful living artist in America. Copies of his work hang in 20 million homes around the world and his licensing brand did \$425 million in sales last year.

I'm talking about the artist who lived in Monte Sereno, had a printmaking operation in Morgan Hill and who called himself "the Painter of Light." Thomas Kinkade's trademark was using patches of light in his paintings because, he said, he wanted to "summon back those perfect moments that hang in our minds

as pictures of harmony...My deepest desire is that my work will help people aspire to the life those kinds of images evoke."

Personally, I've never liked his sentimental paintings and I wouldn't be thinking about him at all in this season except that I was passing through our church library last week. All the Christmas picture books were displayed on the shelf, and my eye caught a book called *Silent Night*, illustrated by Thomas Kinkade. Every page in this book is a Christmas card scene of snow and starlight, gentle forest creatures and warm, glowing cottages, and I wondered whose memory he was painting, because I don't think the world has ever looked like this.

And that's the point. Kinkade simply painted out of his world anything that was ugly or harsh, sad or upsetting, confusing or anxiety producing—in short, anything that was real. He certainly didn't paint his own childhood as it was but only as he wished it had been.

He used to say, "I like to portray the world without the fall." That would be a world without sin, a world without suffering, a world without injustice. But it would also be a world without Jesus. Despite the fact that he would paint "John 3:16" and the sign of the fish in the signature of his original paintings, he painted out the very need for Jesus. Without sin, there is no need of salvation. Without a little grime in our lives, there is no need for grace. Without people sitting in darkness, there is no need for the light. Only those who have walked in darkness can see the great light. Only upon those who have lived in a land of deep darkness can the true light shine. [Isaiah 9:2]

Thomas Kinkade's glowing world is not the world we live in. We live in a world that desperately needs light, but not that kind of light. Our eyes have become so accustomed to the darkness that we have forgotten that we are looking for the Sun of Righteousness to rise.

John's Gospel could be called the Gospel of Light. It begins at the beginning, harkening back to the Book of Genesis where God's Word is uttered into the darkness. All things came into being through the Word, through these words: Let...there... be...light. And "What has come into being in him was life, and the light was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

That is a message we so need to hear this year. After Paris and San Bernardino, we have been walking in darkness and we are letting too many people—well intentioned or not—exploit our too many fears. We have to remind ourselves that we are not waiting for an election; we are waiting for the incarnation. "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."

The truth is that the true light will never be seen in one of those light-infused homes in a Thomas Kinkade painting, because no one lives there, least of all Kinkade himself. Over

the years, there were business scandals. He painfully separated from his wife of 30 years. In 2010, he spent ten days in jail for a DUI. His family tried to get him into treatment. When he was hospitalized for drinking himself into a coma, his doctor told him that if he didn't quit, he would die. And on Good Friday 2012, he did. When you think about it, it's tragic that the Painter of Light couldn't face the dark. He couldn't let himself live through the experience of the cross in order to experience for himself the true light of God's grace.

The Good News of Christmas is that the true light is coming...into *our* homes, with all of our cracked windows, dirty closets and dishes piling up in the sink. The true light is coming into our lives, with all our broken promises, festering wounds and bags of guilt and regret cluttering up the hallway. But the good news is that we don't need picture-perfect lives, where the darkness in us is painted away with dabs of false light. We

can face and embrace the darkness because the true light is coming.

So go happily to your all-too-real homes tonight. Greet the stains on the carpet as well as the ones in your soul. Give thanks for the piles of laundry and bills and all the other problems that are piling up, too. Plop into your unmade bed as if it were a manger. Turn off the light because you don't have to fear the dark anymore. You can sleep soundly tonight because "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth...[and] from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace." Grace and peace to you and Merry Christmas.