

On Packers and Seahawks, Regrets, and James 4

Last Sunday (January 18, 2015), in a thrilling football game close enough to go into overtime, Packer Morgan Burnett intercepted a pass and had a nearly clear path to the end zone. But instead of running, he responded to a teammate's signal to fall to the ground and secure possession of the ball. Why? A football player's instinct when he has the ball is to run with it. Clearly Burnett had been coached to play it safe.

That wasn't the only play that might have changed the outcome of that game and sent the Packers to the Superbowl instead of the Seahawks. But people are criticizing Burnett for securing the ball when he could have run with it. If he had run with the ball and lost it, people would criticize him for being greedy instead of securing the ball. Either way, people would be "sure" he did the wrong thing. No player is safe from second-guessers.

What does that illustrate, apart from 20-20 hindsight? Anytime you're disappointed with an outcome, you (and others) can replay every move you made that might have been a turning point. You might not have gone this direction, but you have no certainty that any alternative would have turned out better. None. You might not have this regret, but you might have a far worse one. You can't be sure.

Can second-guessing our past choices do any good? I can think of one way. We might be more humble about future decisions. We might be slower to judge others, realizing that we never know the whole story.

Every week I invest time in a bunch of international students. I do it for my joy, and I do it for theirs. My joy is greater if I see them experience deep joy, new-life joy, Holy Spirit joy. When I don't see that--especially if I see students failing in other ways--it's easy to second-guess what I am doing. I am always open to something that might be more helpful. I love creativity. Learning from experience--mine and others'--is wise.

But regret is largely an obsession with the unknowable, and 20-20 hindsight is usually a form of arrogance, a false claim to know what would have happened. I wish I could stop doing it. I wish I knew then what I know now. That's like wishing I was less infantile as a baby.

It turns out I'm not in charge. An infinite Creator is. James 4:13-16 says it is sheer arrogance to claim to know what you will do in the future. A realist will say, "If the Lord is willing." This passage follows the verse: "There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?" James might sound harsh, but he's giving GOOD news. You're not in the hands of the second-guessers, but of the One who knows your whole situation completely. He is the same Savior who died to save us and rose to fill us with peace.

Some people believe in a closed system in which every undesirable outcome requires a person to blame and punish. Others put their trust in a good Sovereign who foreknows outcomes we could not have imagined. If you've been beat up by the second-guessers--or by your own regrets--I hope you go with the Sovereign.