

A sabbath way of life (Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Mark 2:23-3:6)

## **My forebears were a little shortsighted with their strict sabbath codes, but they weren't entirely wrong.**

by [Thomas G. Long](#)

June 1, 2018

*To receive these posts by e-mail each Monday, [sign up](#).*

*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

My forebears were Scots Presbyterians and fierce sabbath rule keepers. My grandmother cooked her lavish sabbath feasts on Saturdays, so the stove would not be lit and no work done on the holy day. No sports, no games, no frivolities were allowed on Sunday—only worship, rest, and Bible study. (Although there is a nice family story of a strictly observant relative who spent his sabbath resting in his backyard, where he could easily overhear the radio broadcast of the Cubs baseball game coming through the window of a non-observant neighbor.)

Mark 2:23-28 presents a famous dispute about the sabbath between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees have caught Jesus' disciples plucking grain on the holy day, and they confront Jesus about this alleged infraction of the law. As is often the case with pronouncement stories, the point is the pronouncement, and the tale itself has a bit of a contrived feel—I find it hard to imagine even Jesus' stoutest opponents lurking surreptitiously in the wheat field, spying on the disciples between the stalks. But it hardly matters; what is of interest is Jesus' statement: "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."

As a teenager I welcomed this saying, which I heard as meaning that all the blue-nose Presbyterian rules were off. The sabbath was made for *me*, and that meant I was free to indulge the day with all the movies, football, dances, and whatever else my heart desired.

I have since learned that Jesus had something deeper in mind. His goal was not to annihilate the sabbath, but to restore it to its true purposes. The sabbath is about participating in and anticipating God's rest and God's justice for all. These are the gifts from God that make life human and full, and it is in this sense that "the sabbath was made for humankind."

So my forebears were a little shortsighted in their rules and strict sabbath codes—they got the notes but not the music—but they were in their own way on the right track. The sabbath is a way of life, a way of training one's attention, that leads to the life that really is life. Deep in its disciplines is the goal of clearing away life's clutter and focusing on what truly matters.

In his book *Kaddish*, Leon Wiseltier reports on his decision, after his father died, to observe the practice of reciting the mourner's kaddish, a psalm-like acclamation that is said every day for many months after the death of a loved one. The process involves going to a synagogue and wrapping phylacteries around one's arms, leather bands with box-like chambers containing words of the Torah, and then reciting the kaddish. It is an arduous discipline, perhaps much like the sabbath. But one morning, Wiseltier reports, "I am standing in my phylacteries at dawn, and suddenly they feel different. They do not bind me, they gird me."