



The Salmon River, located in the mountains of east-central Idaho (Nikolas Dahmen)



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October 10, 2026

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Along the riverbank, a small bird dances across the gravel. With a light brown back and a white speckled chest, it deftly darts in between rushes and over top driftwood, feasting on the tiny snails and insects clinging to the rocks. The sandpiper has a bobbing, teetering, bouncing sort of movement, wagging its tail up and down like a child on a trampoline. Occasionally it bursts into the air, wings ablur, crying *peet peet peet* above the water before landing and dancing again on the pebbly shore.

From the opposite bank, I watch this joyful display through my binoculars. I'm sitting on a small boulder along the Salmon River, which flows through the mountains of east-central Idaho. Above me, swallows tumble through the air as warblers and orioles sing in the cottonwoods. Bright purple fireweed blankets the bankside.

Birdwatching has been enjoying a popular moment recently: More than one-third of Americans enjoy the hobby, according to a [report](#) from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Perhaps others took it up during the pandemic, as I did, when anxiety about the future seemed impossible to escape. Watching the birds at my feeder or in local parks provided a peaceful respite from a stressful world.

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The Danish Christian thinker Søren Kierkegaard envisioned birds as teachers worthy of our attention. His work *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air* is a contemplation on the Sermon on the Mount, in which Christ instructs us to "look at the birds of the air" ([Matthew 6:26](#)).

"It is throughout the bird's entire life," Kierkegaard writes, that "everywhere and always it finds something — or, better, it finds enough — in which to take joy. It does not waste a single moment, but it would view as wasted every moment in which it was not joyful."

But how does the spotted sandpiper find joy? Hunting for food is no idle task: In the course of procuring its own dinner, the sandpiper must take care not to become dinner itself. When it calls out *peet peet peet*, hoping to attract a mate, it risks attracting a harrier or weasel instead. Where is joy in this life filled with hunger and anxiety?

Kierkegaard answers: "There is a saying by the apostle Paul that the lily and the bird have taken to heart and, simple as they are, they take it quite literally ... 'Cast all

your care and sorrow upon God.' "

Of course they do, I think. They're birds! What other options do they have?

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If only it were that easy for me, a human person, to excise my cares and sorrows from my present experiences and give them to God. It's simply not possible. What cares and sorrows could I possibly share with a sandpiper? I'm concerned about rising prices for food and gas, a warming planet and the ever-increasing rate of extinctions. My student loans are accruing interest every day. If I had nothing to do but dance along riverbanks, I would be joyful too.

I refocus my binoculars on the sandpiper. There's two of them now, still dancing, probing, fluttering and *peet-peet*-ing. A pair of merganser hens glide across the river, followed by a collection of ducklings. Wild irises bloom across the gravel, and bumblebees inspect their deep purple petals. Tall grasses hang over the water, swaying in the evening wind, their seed stalks dressed in leafy tuxedos. Smooth pebbles tile the riverbed like terrazzo. Fish, clad in shimmering scales, jump in the sunset light. Frescos of pines adorn the towering mountains.

Kierkegaard writes: "In nature, everything is unconditional obedience. The sighing of the wind, the echo of the forest, the murmuring of the brook, the hum of summer, the whispering of the leaves, the hiss of the grass, every sound, every sound you hear, it is all compliance, unconditional obedience."

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The order of the natural world is striking. Every creature has its niche, its own specific role to play in the ecosystem. These roles are not the result of creatures' own design, but the product of countless interactions between individuals, species and the environment throughout time.

In this way, the task of the sandpiper is given to it by God, its creator, through the natural forces of evolution. The sandpiper obeys, responding to the present moment in the manner prescribed. The sandpiper's obedience is strenuous, filled with risk and caution, not a careless obedience, but a care-full one.

What, then, are the tasks set out for me? Here, Christ answers: "Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you. Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has troubles enough of its own" (Matthew 6:33-34).

Kierkegaard describes joy as "the present time, with the entire emphasis falling on the present time." The sandpiper experiences joy because it has cast its cares and sorrows upon God, not getting rid of them, but by confronting them faithfully in the present moment. The bird still hungers. It still faces danger. It still searches for a mate and watches for predators. Yet it responds to each moment according to the task given by its Creator. Through all its cares and sorrows, the bird dances before the Lord. The invitation for us is to do the same.

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