The Word of the Lord from Luke 2: And [Jesus] said to them, “Why were you looking for Me? Did you not know that I must be in My Father's house?” This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Behold the twelve-year-old eternal Son of God, concerned with the things of the Father. He goes with His parents to Jerusalem for the Passover. That's enough to get our attention. The Passover is the annual feast to remember how God delivered the people of Israel from the Egyptians; how, when the Lord came through the land to kill the firstborn of Egypt, He spared the sons inside of homes marked with the blood of the Lamb.

Throughout the Old Testament, the annual Passover meal isn't just a remembrance, though: it points to Jesus—the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, who comes to shed His blood on the cross for the forgiveness of sins, so that the Lord passes over those who believe in Him and spares them from eternal death. When Jesus goes with His parents to this festival, He is who the Passover points to...and nobody knows it but Him.

They go to Jerusalem, of course. Where else would they go? It's the big city of Judea, where the king's palace is. It's also the destination for Passover pilgrims, because that's where the temple is. It's where Passover sacrifices are made to God. It's also, as Jesus will say with tears later on, where many prophets are killed by the Lord's people as they reject Him. For the most joyful and grievous reasons, Jerusalem is the location of salvation: it's where God is present in His temple, where sacrifices are made, where blood is shed and prophets are killed.

All of this is in the background for the twelve-year-old Jesus. The "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" goes with his parents to the place where kings reign, prophets die and priests offer sacrifices to God. Later on, He'll be the King with the crown of thorns, enthroned on the cross. He'll be the Prophet who is put to death for speaking the Word of God. He'll be the Priest who offers the sacrifice for sin, and He'll be the Lamb who is sacrificed for sin. All of this history and liturgy of Jerusalem and Passover point to Jesus, swirl around Him, as He goes to Jerusalem as a twelve-year-old.

We hear nothing about the feast itself, just the return trip. Mary and Joseph travel a day's journey back home before they realize that Jesus isn't with them. Though it sounds like a terrible case of neglect, it's really not: like the covered wagon trains of American history, pilgrims found strength in numbers. They would travel in caravans to assist one another in case of illness or attack from robbers. It wouldn't look like an organized unit marching in formation, but a mass of humanity shifting down the road. Men might walk with men, women with women and kids run circles around the rest. So it appears here, and it's only in the evening as the families regroup that Mary and Joseph discover Jesus isn't there. They hustle back to Jerusalem, and one wonders what they're thinking: even when the bloodthirsty Herod the Great was out to kill Jesus, the Lord used Mary and Joseph to keep Jesus safe. Now, on a benign pilgrimage to Jerusalem and back, they've lost the Son of God.

He's missing for three days (!), because they're looking in all the wrong places. They finally find Him where they should have looked in the first place: He's in the temple. He's not just in the temple, but He's sitting among the teachers. He's more than just an onlooker or a student.
He's listening to them, asking them questions and giving them answers. They listen to Jesus and they're amazed at His answers. The twelve-year-old Jesus is teaching them. What does He say? We don't have the transcript, but I'll offer this: there's no doubt at all that Jesus is rightly dividing the Word of truth, that He's properly distinguishing Law and Gospel. It's a good bet that the teachers at the temple are in full agreement with the Sadducees, whose teachings are so skewed that they deny the resurrection. Can you imagine their amazement as this twelve-year-old—from Nazareth, no less!—keeps refuting their theology and pointing them back to the Gospel with His questions?

That's where Mary and Joseph find Jesus. They're astonished, too—and doubtless both relieved and upset as parents will be when a lost child is found. Mary says, "Son, why have You treated us so? Behold, Your father and I have been searching for You in great distress." That, to me, seems a reasonable complaint from the lips of Mary. If that is the case for you, it only shows how much you and I need to pay attention to the Word of God, especially Jesus' answer here. These are the very first recorded words of the incarnate Christ in the Bible, and they are worthy of our consideration.

Jesus says to them: "Why were you looking for Me? Did you not know that I must be in My Father's house?"

"Why were you looking for Me? Did you not know?" He asks. This isn't a petulant adolescent saying "I can take care of myself." No, this is the Word-made-flesh announcing the story of His life: Jesus will be misunderstood throughout His ministry, even by His family and His disciples. His closest friends and loved ones won't understand what He's doing. They'll doubt and disbelieve and question and sometimes try to prevent Him from what He's come to do. But He'll keep going. He will not be discouraged from carrying out His Father's plan.

That's the second part of His statement: "I must be about My Father's business." Some translations read, "I must be about My Father's business," which isn't bad either. A better translation might be, "I must be about the things of My Father."

"I must," He says, and the "must" word there is significant. Jesus doesn't use it all that much, but when He does, it's usually in verses like these: "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (Luke 9:22); or "[the Son of Man] must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation" (Luke 17:25); or "I must go on My way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem" (Luke 13:33). When Jesus uses this word for "must," He's almost always talking about the cross.

So it is here, when He says, "I must be about the things of My Father." Mary's just said, "Your father and I have been looking for you," and Jesus responds that He has a different Father. He declares that He is the Son of God Most High, and He must be about the things of His Father. And by the things of His Father, He means that He must go to the cross.

It's a long journey from here to Calvary. For now, He goes back to Nazareth and grows up, perfect and submissive to His parents, increasing in wisdom and stature, in favor with God and man. We won't hear anything more about His life in the Gospels until He arrives at the Jordan for His baptism at around the age of thirty...when John the Baptist points and declares, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!" That's when the journey to cross picks up the pace, when the things of God begin to happen in earnest.

So behold the twelve-year-old Jesus, going about the things of His Father for your salvation; and rejoice that He was once crucified for your sins and now is raised from the dead,
that He lives and reigns for all eternity. You will not always understand Him; and in fact, the devil, the world and your own sinful flesh are hard at work so that you either reject Him by doubt or explain Him away. That’s why, like Mary, you treasure His Words and His deeds in your heart. You hold fast to Jesus, believing in Him even when you don’t understand. You give thanks that He went about the things of His Father—even the cross—for your salvation. You’ll wander at times—as Mary and Joseph did for three days in Jerusalem, trying to find Jesus where He hasn’t promised to be. That’s when you repent again and hear Him say, “Why were you looking for Me? Did you not know I’d be present where I promise—in My Word and Sacraments? And so you rejoice that the same Jesus who sat in the temple is still about the things of His Father here and now, giving you grace by His Word and His Supper so that you might be His people.

Because Jesus went about the things of His Father, you will be in His Father’s house forever; because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen