

Mara the Pioneer



By Jessica Larsen

(Based on a true story)

October 2018, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Mara buttoned her skirt and looked in the mirror. It felt funny to wear church clothes on a Saturday, but this was a special Saturday. It was general conference!

“Are you excited for the women’s session?” *Mak* (Mom) asked. She brushed Mara’s hair with quick, gentle strokes. “I want you to try to listen as much as you can.”

“Yes! I hope they tell pioneer stories!” Mara liked those best.

“Maybe they will,” *Mak* said. “Did you know your dad is a pioneer?”

Mara was confused. Her dad had never ridden in a covered wagon, like the early pioneers.

“How is he a pioneer?” she asked.

Mak nodded toward the window, toward the river. “He was fishing there when he met the missionaries. He was the first one in his family to get baptized,” *Mak* said. “That makes him a pioneer! Now let’s go find your grandmother.”

Yiay (Grandma) was waiting for them in the front room. Mara’s family and her grandparents all lived together. *Yiay* helped take care of Mara after school while her parents worked. Now *Yiay* stood by the moped, the big motorized scooter that carried them around the city.

“The Church has only been in Cambodia for 25 years,” *Mak* told Mara as she opened the door and pushed the moped onto the street. “So we’re all pioneers. Even you!”

“How am I a pioneer?” Mara wondered as she got on the moped. *Mak* drove the moped, with *Yiay* in back and Mara in the middle. Mara held on tight as they zoomed down the crowded street.

As they passed a café, the smell of tea wafted over them. Almost everyone here drank tea. But Mara didn’t. She followed the Word of Wisdom. Mara grinned. That’s one way she was a pioneer!

As the moped turned a corner, Mara saw a *wat*, a Buddhist temple. The red pointed roof rose above the other buildings. Monks with shaved heads and orange robes sat studying in the courtyard.



Mara knew that most people in Cambodia were Buddhist. They didn't believe in Jesus Christ. But Mara did. *That's another way I'm a pioneer*, thought Mara. And today she would get to listen to the prophet!

As the moped turned into the church parking lot, Mara saw lots of women arriving. Some had walked or ridden mopeds. Others arrived in *tuk tuks*, small carriages pulled by a motorbike. Many of the women wore dresses or plain skirts, like Mara did. And some wore *sampots*, beautiful long skirts made of colorful patterned fabrics.

Mara, Mak, and Yiay sat down in the chapel with the other women. Conference had actually happened a whole week ago in Salt Lake City, Utah, USA. But now the people in Cambodia would be able to watch the broadcast in Khmer. Mara spoke both English and Khmer at home, and she also learned French in school. But many Cambodians just spoke Khmer.

The first speaker didn't tell any stories about pioneers. But then the second speaker told a story about walking

up a steep dirt path on her way home from school. It was called the "boys' trail," and sometimes she would take off her shoes and walk barefoot. She wanted to do hard things so she could be like a pioneer! Mara smiled as she thought about all the ways *she* was a pioneer.

The last speaker was the prophet. He stood tall. Mara listened extra closely. "I invite you to read the Book of Mormon between now and the end of the year," he said. "The heavens will open for you. The Lord will bless you."

Mara knew it wouldn't be easy to read the whole Book of Mormon. She looked at the women around her. All of them had chosen to follow Jesus Christ. All of them had come tonight to listen to the prophet. She would follow the prophet, just as they did. She would be a pioneer! ●

The author lives in Texas, USA.

In the October 2018 general conference, President Russell M. Nelson also announced that the Church will build a temple in Cambodia!

July 24 is Pioneer Day!

Who is a pioneer in your family?

